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Michael Graeme

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by

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By Fall of Night

"The most vital issue of the age is whether the future progress of humanity is to be governed by the modern, economic and materialistic mind of the West or by a nobler pragmatism guided, uplifted and enlightened by spiritual culture and knowledge."

Sri Aurobindo 1872-1950

Chapter 1

I dreamed of her again last night - at least I think I've dreamed of her before, but sometimes dreams are like that, aren't they? They plant an impression, as you dream, that you've dreamed something before, when you haven't. And even though you haven't, the fact you think you have alters your whole outlook, at least so long as you remain dreaming. You become convinced your life is one thing, when actually it's quite another and all coloured by this possibly false conviction - unless it isn't false, and you really have dreamed this dream before, but merely forgotten.

And then what?

Anyway, I'm following her along this woodland path, dappled sunlight falling in pools of molten white along the way, and painting luminous streaks in her long black hair. She's wearing a black suit that fits her beautifully, accentuating a lithe figure, curvy around her hips and derrière. Her movements are quick and nimble, like a dancer, and I'm struggling to keep up. I have the impression she's the only one who knows the way, and I'd better watch out because I don't want to get lost in the woods.

We come to a fork in the path. One route goes down-hill into a greater leafy darkness, towards the roar of running water, and I imagine a hidden fall of vertiginous depth. The other continues rising gently, and looks as if it emerges into the light, a little way up a yellow-painted hillside. There's a stone marking the junction - tall, rough hewn. It might be a standing stone, or more likely a Victorian facsimile, its meaning lost to us now. The sun plays upon it in an eerie fashion, animating it, making it pulse in long, slow waves of dappled light. It marks a parting of the ways; I'm being presented with a choice: the light or the dark.

Well, Timothy, which is it to be?

I'm tempted to choose the lighter path, but don't really trust my intuition well enough to act upon it. I'm afraid the path will peter out into a waste of barren moor, that it's the darker way that will lead me through to a more fertile conclusion, though from this angle it looks less promising. I'm afraid of the darkness too, afraid of the hidden water, afraid of falling, afraid of drowning in the depths of myself, alone and unknown.

She pauses, places a hand upon the stone and turns to look at

me. She has a smile that puts me in mind of the Mona Lisa: inscrutable, mysterious. I don't know her face, it's no one of my acquaintance, which makes her the unknown woman from the dreams of Jung, and her beauty shocks me; it's sublime, profound, deeply stirring. Then I see the white slit of the clerical collar and I feel the guilt and confusion of being in love with a woman of God - and worse, of wanting to make love to her.

It wakes me to the dawn light and to a feeling of oppression, also to a sense of thwarted longing much keener than anything I've felt in years. I know my dreams, even if I don't always understand them - something's stirring, something odd and dangerous. A journey, perhaps? A transition? God? False choices? Who is she? I'm sure she'd been about to say something, her name perhaps, but I woke too soon to hear it. Or did I just forget? Did the dream mean me not to hear it?

You never know with dreams, do you?

I lie there for a moment in the warm cocoon of a post-sleep stupor, and I reel back as much of this as I can, landing the details, each a slippery, iridescent fish, leaping and twisting for escape - but I can't get at those words. I see her lips move but,...

The alarm goes off.

Damn!

I'm left with just the fragments now: *fear of the deeper darker realm of the forest. Afraid of trusting my intuition because it so often goes against the logical facts of material reality. And like all humans, the biggest fear I have in the day to day of my life is simply that of feeling stupid.*

The path of light is the one I can see, the one I'm treading every day and, yes, I am afraid of it petering out into a barren waste of meaninglessness and, most likely, the uncertain void of an early retirement. The dark depths might prove more fertile, but it takes more guts than I have to go wandering about down there - I mean all the way down.

Where my daemons live.

I knock the alarm off and reach for the 'Droid, jab in the details of my dream, then squirt them into the cloud where I keep the autobiography of my time here on earth. Yes, I know there are state-salaried snoopers of all nationalities these days who scan the clouds for such careless chatter as this.

Perhaps you're one of them.

May I call you Cloud Snooper? No, that’s too unwieldy - let's shorten it to C.S. Or better still, let's make a clever little joke of it, and call you Lewis. There, I like it. It gives you a human face, though I suspect you be mostly machine. I scan my words ahead of you, and ponder their meaning. Other men have movie stars for muses. I have a vicar. Perhaps, Lewis, you will e-mail, and explain all of this to me, for we have no greater, all-watchful and all-knowing god than you these days.

Chapter 2

All right,...

Six thirty: Rise; pee out my aching bladder, then shuffle into the back garden for Qigong, warming gradually to Tai Chi, then a little Kung Fu. These are Chinese exercises for mind and body, Lewis. There is no equivalent system in the West, where the imaginative faculties have been regarded with increasing suspicion since they day we laid Wordsworth to rest in Saint Oswald's churchyard.

That was in 1850.

Seven fifteen now: Shower then breakfast, while I scroll through the news on the 'Droid: War, sexual perversion, torture, corruption, terror-bogeymen and economic collapse. Same as it's always been.

Eight o'clock: I leave the house and drive from the southern suburbs of Middleton, to the north, to the school. My radio is tuned to the BBC. There's a politician of the party of the rich bluntly evading questions while landing spurious rabbit punches on the policies of the party of the less rich. I note there is no party of the poor these days. The vacuum is suffocating. No one of intelligence talks about change any more, only of adaptation to circumstances that cannot be altered. The interview ends in a stalemated nothingness, fades back into the breathless reportage of war, rape, torture, corruption, and economic collapse.

I shiver: someone moving over my grave.

My,.. the world feels hollow this morning.

M? Is that you?

Eight fifteen, I'm cruising past Dave's Dodgy motors on Elm Street, and see an old MX5 for sale, all glittery in the early morning sunlight. Am I not overdue a change of vehicle, Lewis? Is a little sport's car too menopausal do you think? But what's wrong with having a bit of fun? What's wrong with waking up and trying to engage more with my reality? But a little sport's car, Timothy?

Do grow up!

Eight thirty: The day begins. Meeting with other male colleagues in the boss's office, all of us seated like ministers of state around a pretentious oval table. I don't know what the meeting's about yet, and I'm too old to care. Besides, it's Friday, the last day of term, and I'm travelling to the cabin tomorrow for a six week break - my annual summer decompression.

I'm looking at the boss - I no longer call these transient, self important nincompoops "Headmasters". We've had such a long string of them in recent years, all the same, all of them on a springboard to somewhere else, and not one of them teachers. Surprised, Lewis? When was the last time you were in a school? They come from Corporateville these days, wearing sharp suits, their mission being to similarly corporatise these ancient, crumbling institutions, turn them into profitable examination factories, into businesses with Orwellian slogans like "Excellence in Everything" or "All children are created equal,... "

War is peace. Freedom is slavery.

And all that.

Remember your Orwell do you, Lewis?

Ignorance is the new enlightenment.

I notice Orwell is no longer on the approved syllabus. The irony amuses me.

Apologies, you may find my cynicism wearing. The cynic is funny for a while, but his company soon becomes tedious. I promise to do better.

What's he like, this man? It's impossible to know for sure of course. All I can describe is his mask, hideously distorted through the lens of my own shortcomings.

Middle fifties, silver haired, immaculately groomed, Strickland sits upright like a spoof news anchorman. He has a smile like Jabba the Hutt - huge, insincere, and slightly disgusting. He notices my quietly analytical gaze, looks unhurriedly away, then flicks self-importantly through his impressively stuffed diary. I am his audience for that moment and am close to being flattered he should think me worthy of such a performance. He's not much older than me and I'm wondering what the difference in us is; what quirk of fate, or genetic coding, puts him there and me where I am?

And where is that, Timothy Magowan?

Let's see: forty nine years old, childless, divorced, nothing in your life now except your job and your dreams, and a cabin in the Lakes. And your dreams are more real to you than anything, aren't they? What does that make you? Dreamer? Loser? Ne'er-do-well?

Enough!

The meeting gets under way:

Ah,... it's another subtle reminder of the dress code: the question of the suit that some of us are still not wearing. Strickland has

already won over the women - had them parading around like corporate tarts for months, so I'm left wondering at the source of his charisma, because all he does with the guys is get their backs up. There's nothing wrong in this; when even teachers fail to recognise the empty gloss of corrupt authority, we really are in trouble.

Wait a minute - the suit!

A dream fragment surfaces: *The vicar is wearing an immaculate suit. Is there a link there, Lewis? But what of the sexual angle? Because that suit definitely makes me want to have sex - sex like I knew it in my youth, when I was taken over by an energy that was not my own, working me up into a tornado of detached erotic madness for hours and hours and hours.*

Wait! Was it ever like that for me?

Stop it, Tim. Pay attention now.

Strickland has cleared his throat and put up the first slide. Bullet points: *Empowerment, Emote, Enrich, Emphasize, Energize*. His famous five E's. But try as I might, they refuse to gel into anything collectively meaningful – and I have been trying all term. I also have to work hard to forgive him the Americani"z"ation of the words Emphasise and Energise - apologies to my American snoopers; that's the trouble with us English teachers of course, if we're not careful we no longer see poetry in words, just the spelling mistakes and the debatable points of grammar - not that there's any poetry here - just the same old bullshit.

He'd be better simply handing out a note that says "wear a suit to work next term or you're sacked". I might even respect that, but it would be too direct for the modern day workplace, and Strickland has a PhD in mealy-mouthedness.

Of the twenty male members of staff gathered that morning, most by now have succumbed and bought themselves cheap supermarket threads in regulation grey. Conformance need not cost the earth - indeed I've observed it's often the cheapest road to ruin. So, the meeting is aimed at those of us who have yet to capitulate.

Like me.

I feel myself blushing.

I'm wearing an indestructible Harris Tweed, purchased in Edinburgh twenty years ago, and probably worn every day since then, a jacket that holds more kit among its multitude of sturdy pockets than any corporate butty box. But tweed is not "Corporate". It's too relaxed, conveys the wrong message. It does not say:

"excellence in all things". Nor do my industrial grade chorded trousers, and brown brogues.

They are too,... workmanlike.

What does your appearance convey, Tim?

I'm thinking of the earth, down-to-earthness, and common sense. Integrity too? Yes. I would like to think so. We're growing short on common sense these days, and have long ago replaced integrity with the false security of tick boxes.

You are becoming old fashioned Tim - is it not time you moved aside for the suited ones?

Hmm.

What's that he's saying now?

Ah, he's droning on about values, but his voice sounds like a bee in a bottle and I'm thinking of the vicar again, of her smile and I'm wondering if there's any significance in her pausing by that standing stone, significance in the speculation over its authenticity. *The authenticity of religion, Tim? Or is the stone the hermetic heart, the mystical core of all religion?* It is hewn from the earth. The ten commandments were written on stone, implying what? An ordinance that is not man made, but a divine truth, from God. And if you don't like the G word then from the Universe, Universe with a capital U, or the Great Ground of Being, or All That Is. How many names do we have for God these days? And none of them true.

I snatch back to the present but only to lament how corporatisation, like monolithic religion, seems to degrade innate intelligence, empowering those who conform at the expense of those who do not. I'm appalled; after thirty years at the chalk face, will it be this comfy old jacket, and not my obsolescence that unseats me?

How banal!

I note since the last meeting, another of our number has succumbed. That leaves two of us, the other being Raul Hankinson, head of art, who is still reassuringly casual in full volume Hawaiian shirt and shorts, and behind whose rich razzle-dazzle I now take metaphorical cover.

The kids love Raul. Never was a teacher more popular than he. He relaxes them to a point just short of insolence, boshes skilfully with them. His art classes have the appearance of a loosely contained explosion, one that has been known to have the inspectors reaching for Ibuprofen. But his results speak for

themselves; grades in art are outstanding.

But art is of no interest to Strickland. It does not open doors to the suited halls, to the vast open plans of the modern workplace with its rows of Visiphones.

Children are notably subdued by suits. Suits make robots, and robots have always been a scary concept, human in form only, hosts then for all our projected fears. And suits, like uniforms, hide incompetence. We've known this since the sixties, been fighting this since the sixties. I thought we'd won, so how the hell did the suits get the upper hand of a sudden? All right, I think you have a handle on my politics now, Lewis, enough to profile me. But what I'd really like to know is when, behind this tired old cover of blistering cynicism, did I begin to feel so worthless and alone?

Chapter 3

"It was when they started shutting the factories," says Raul.

We're walking the corridors, freed from our tutor groups and our registers. We are stepping out now into the fray. The place is sweaty and dusty and crushed with uniforms - uniforms in various stages of reversion to self expression: ties folded into infeasibly fat full Windsors, skirts rolling up from their waistbands to reveal more knee than regulation allows. The feel of that meeting is still sliding from our faces, dripping uncomfortably with the raw sulphurous egg that Strickland habitually regurgitates in our direction.

"It was when we reinstated the idea of 'us' and 'them'," he goes on.'"Them' being the disenfranchised losers who are out of work, or languishing on minimum wage, and 'us' being the fucking conformist wankers who aren't."

Girls gasp and turn aside, blushing at his language, mostly in approval.

Raul has a face lined with much history, little of it good. He fled his native Africa in the eighties but found a Britain he describes as far from living up to his expectations. He found himself caught up in a minor riot in Toxteth, claims innocence, but got a baton in his face and twelve stitches across his forehead for his trouble, mainly on account of his colour. He concluded we don't do it any differently to anyone else - just not as often, but only on account of cold blood and apathy. His art now features policemen's helmets, and Billybats and Tazer darts lighting up the bodies of schoolchildren, their faces frozen in a terrified catatonia as a corporatised state bears down upon them.

His vision of our future unsettles me.

I deny it wings.

I'm surprised his dismissal has not yet been constructed. I'm sure Strickland is capable of it; Raul's themes, like much of his language, are decidedly "off message".

I remember asking him once, as I stood in his art-room, at the same time admiring and yet equally repulsed by his images: "Are things really so bad as this, Raul?"

"If this shit makes you ask the question," he replied, "It doesn't matter if it's right or wrong, or accurate to how things really are. There is no right or wrong in art, man. All that matters is you're

honest to yourself and you provoke a reaction."

I'd thought he was pretty well up himself in those days - typical arty type. Not exactly on the same planet as the rest of us. But as the years have passed I've grown to respect him, grown to understand him more, mainly because I've learned you can't rely on society to do the dreaming for you. You have to do the dreaming for yourself, or your life will always lack meaning and direction.

I'm sorry if at times I appear nonsensical, but as a wise and very beautiful lady once said: it's better to be utterly ridiculous than absolutely boring.

Marylin Monroe, Lewis.

Save you Googling.

I'm a bit of a film buff, though forties noire is more my cup of tea these days.

I turn to Raul now as I'm about to peel off into my room, conscious of the kids already lined up by the door, curious of my relationship with this genial, wizened bear of a man.

"So, Raul, when are you getting the suit? I hear they have some deals on cheap sweatshop-threads at Freshways supermarket."

He flashes me a grin, "When Hell freezes over. You?"

"I'll get one when I see you wearing one."

"Deal."

We laugh, shake hands on it, the last of the rebels, but nothing good will come of it. We deny any of this is serious, but it's serious to Strickland, and he didn't get to where he is without the ability to break people. I note we were both eyeballed in the meeting; only Raul had the nerve to reflect it back unflinchingly, so Strickland blinked away and focused instead on me.

Raul has survived unspeakable torture and years of solitary confinement at the hands of a regime less subtle about its descent into repressiveness; Strickland cannot intimidate him. Me? I've suffered nothing more serious than the loss of my soul, which I recognise makes me vulnerable; I'm fond of the old ways, of the romance of teaching - a la Mr Chips - , but we're not even trusted to be near children these days - the authorities assuming we're all potential paedophiles, so even our mobile telephones must be handed in at the school office lest we take photographs of our charges during the day, then wank ourselves blind over them at night.

The only person exempt from this humiliating and rather

depressing precaution, I note, is Strickland, and I wouldn't trust him with my grandmother.

I worry about putting that word *paedophile* into the cloud, lest you take it out of context, Lewis, and use it to oppress me. Can your text parsers interpret irony? Do they recognise and categorise? For the record then: I am a drone and largely defenceless. I am also brainless, trustless and in the process of being stripped of my professionalism. I deliver a heavily proscribed syllabus,... dollop it up with a blind apathy, now, like the school cook, anaemic gravy splashes and all, the pair of us starved of funds so we are reduced to a very poor and watery fayre indeed.

How does one escape such a mess as this?

Sorry, Lewis, I'm going on a bit here,...

Where was I?

Story, Tim, *story*,...

Righto.

I do not want to wear the suit, which is a symbol of all I've come to hate. I have a little money, but not yet the guts to walk away, wagging Strickland my Agincourt fingers. What then is my purpose, Reverend? What is my journey?

I ask the question of my Priestess, and look for augurs.

You think I'm joking?

Amelia Grey walks by; thirty five, dark blue trouser suit, black high-heels clicking, hips swaying like a fashion model. As augurs go, this is a pleasing start, but also confusing. Raul and I are simultaneously distracted as she winks at us, and our eyes follow the roll of her deliciously cushioned derrière. The corridor coos in approval at our middle aged weakness, also her sauciness. And I'm thinking: dark suit, long black hair? Is she the prototype for my vicar? It's possible. But I'm pushing fifty, and the thought of making love to a thirty five year old woman like Amelia seems even less feasible than making love to a vicar.

Far too energetic, I imagine.

No, sex is not it, Lewis; I am not suppressing lust, though the Freudians would point out the unambiguously phallic nature of that standing stone in the dream. But I am not a Freudian. I am of the Zurich school and my dreams oblige accordingly, though I admit with no more clarity. The nearest interpretation I can come up with is I'm staring something in the face, being presented with a source of great spiritual power and meaning, and all I want to do is fuck it.

I feel a rush of recognition, and wonder if this could be the truth, except by now I no longer remember the question.

What was the question please?

Augurs?

Significance?

Reading the world like a dream?

Miss Rayworth is seeing in her charges next door. I inadvertently catch her eye. Dowdy Miss Rayworth. Age indeterminate, but something past forty, also suited, but in a crumpled thrift shop sort of way, and lame - white hands clutching an old lady's walking cane. I wonder if she's smirking at Raul and I, our tongues metaphorically hanging out. I want to tell her it's not how it looks, that I don't feel the same way about women I used to do, that I am largely dead from the neck down these days, and all of this is merely an intellectual exploration.

She looks at us, briefly, her expression blank, then turns aside and follows her charges in. I feel myself seen but unnoticed - story of my life - and realise I don't even know her first name. But whose fault is that, Timothy? Did you never think to ask it?

"Do you fancy Miss Grey, sir?"

Audience titters.

"Hmm?"

We are settled in class now, thumbing through our readers - Steinbeck: Mice and Men. I know; it's the last day of term and other teachers are showing their charges Digital Video Discs of blockbuster movies, and otherwise giving over to chaos, while here I am familiarising them ahead of time with what will be their study text next term. Indeed the poor dears will be studying this little book so deeply and so intently over the coming years, they'll leave Middleton High School, (a specialist language college) throwing up at the very mention of it.

I think about the question regarding Miss Grey. Decide it best not answer directly, but neither must I show weakness or they will seize upon it.

"Don't you, Mr. Stott?"

Christopher (Plank) Stott; what use has he for Steinbeck? I'm fond of the boy - no, not in *that* way, Lewis - but he'll never make it to college, let alone university. No suit for him, except for weddings and funerals. And why should he worry about that? After all, he's good with his hands and would make a success of himself building

cabinets, or doing plumbing, or wiring, or joinery - all things that are essential and potentially lucrative in any civilised society, yet sadly out of fashion, and certainly do not come under the banner of Strickland's elusive "excellence".

Stop.

Pause for breath:

They are too,... ugh,... *vocational*.

We are failing him. Failing most of the children here under the pretence of valuing them, measuring them for suits, when jeans and tee shirts are more comfortable. No wonder they pattern their skins with an indelible and subcutaneous ink at the first opportunity.

My honest advice for Mr Stott would be to concentrate on his spelling and his basic English, then others might take him seriously at whatever he settles to in the future, that Steinbeck is indeed a waste of time for him. I could recommend other extracurricular readers that would light him up, but he has a lot of Steinbeck to come, and this of course will kill his desire for reading anything but the big tit red-tops in the years to come.

"Tits are too small, sir!"

Laughter.

Mention of Miss Grey's tits in the same breath as the big tit red-tops? An echo from the universe, Lewis, and a curious synchronicity! I like that. I might have returned that I hadn't noticed, but it would be lie, and would only have escalated things.

Dangerous territory.

So,...

Line drawn.

"Thank you for volunteering to read first for us, Mr. Stott."

Groans. More laughter, a hint of embarrassment. Am I blushing? I'll be sweating in a minute. Move on quickly now. My word the energy in the classroom is vibrant this morning, also colourful, but not threatening. I decide it's safe to draw upon it, and I smile.

Mr Stott reads slowly, slightly wooden, but with increasing fluency. I let him off after half a page, then subdue any further embarrassing outbursts by smothering him in cheap praise. "Well done Mr. Stott. You read that very well."

He blushes modestly.

I smell a mixture of sweaty armpits and strong body spray, mostly female. Janice Iddon is looking at me with cow eyes, big pancakes of sweat pooling under her arms. I'm too old for her to

have a crush on me - that's an occupational hazard that fades once a man gets past thirty five - so I am left to assume it's a father figure she desires. I would tell her I am not a good candidate, having failed in the requisite sperm department long ago. The rest of it remains a mystery to me.

I ask her to read next. Her voice is measured, lyrical, sweet.

It sends a shiver up my spine.

Someone standing over my grave.

The day ripens.

Chapter 4

There are teachers here who swagger with self importance, and even from a distance they sicken me. Is this still some weakness in myself - like the way I hate Strickland for no good reason? I thought I had rooted out all these shadow triggers by now, but at least I am not alone in my weakness:

"Look at that bastard Lister," says Raul.

We're eating lunch in the glazed refectory, gazing out across the courtyard where John Lister is upbraiding a sleight young first year for walking on the grass. The child is eleven, sensitive, perhaps a little de-mob happy in anticipation of his holidays, and is by now traumatised by this big besuited moron who is incandescent, red faced, and ejecting spittle with every full stop.

An unpleasant man for sure, disappointed in his career, and in his private life, I suspect.

"Seems a little disproportionate," I reply, then realise I'm similarly disappointed on both counts, and wonder what the difference is - I mean why do I like children, universally, good and bad, and he appears to hate them. Is it because I have none of my own, and he has too many?

"What would you have done?" asks Raul.

Like me, Raul never looks at the surface of life, but reads every event like the page of an oracle, scouring it for the solution to life's deeper meaning. Raul has no children either - he suspects the result of electrodes attached to his scrotum for no good reason other than routine induction to a particularly nasty prison regime.

"I suppose I would have asked the boy politely not to walk on the grass - while lamenting with him how most rules are just a pain the arse."

"Me too, I think. But that's us Timothy. Do we trade our egos for cheap popularity? And is such a thing any less repellent in the eyes of God?"

Mention of God puts me on my guard, bringing back snippets from the dream. "All I know is it makes my days pass more quickly the easier they are, " I reply. "And I wouldn't say I've achieved popularity, more a kind of safe mediocrity. Not like you, Raul. You're very popular, very colourful, dressed like that, shamelessly effing and blinding all over the place. Me? I'm just your regular

invisible grey tweed Englishman. Harmless, patient, confused. Popularity? I don't know. I think if you're sincere, it gives you an easier ride in class. They sense it. I'd rather they were relaxed around me than fearful. It's just my way. Yours too, I think?"

Raul nods sagely. "Children are perceptive," he says. "They suffer fools badly, can recognise a pillock from a hundred paces. Only adults have learned tolerate them."

"True."

"And Lister's like that with everyone, have you noticed?"

"He's always very polite to me."

"On the surface, yes, I don't doubt it. But underneath he thinks you're a spineless twit. However, he also knows you've got a black-belt in something Chinese - because I told him - and this confuses him, but it helps him moderate his tone with you. You want to know how someone really is? Listen to the way they speak to a dog, or a small child."

"Wait - back up a bit there; he thinks I'm a spineless twit?"

"Don't take it so hard - you got off lightly; he thinks I'm a waste of space, and that art is no vocation for a man."

"You told him I have a black belt in Kung Fu? But I don't. We didn't grade back then. And I don't fight. I never have. I wouldn't know the first thing about it."

"Like he's going to know the difference. No sense having an edge and not using it to your advantage. The silent warrior! The warrior monk! This is the myth we should be weaving for you. The whole world is built on myths, not truths. No one knows what the truth is. The truth is something we merely invent to suit ourselves."

"Unless it's cast in stone."

"Hmm?"

"Never mind. I think I prefer spineless twit. It's not far off the mark anyway."

"If you were spineless you would have worn the suit months ago, discarded your fine Harris Tweed for cheapness and deceit."

"If Strickland starts getting nasty, I'll probably do it anyway, in spite of what I promised you earlier - leave you standing out like a blind cobbler's thumb in your fluorescent floral shirt."

Raul thinks about this. He's been betrayed before of course, someone speaking his name just to make the pain stop. He looks grave for a moment "You must do what you have to do in order to survive. But rest assured, my friend, I shall never judge you."

We've become morbid for a moment. Time for a change of subject: "Anyway, have you noticed Lister's suit? That's made to measure. Almost as good as Stricklands. Do you think he's out for deputy?"

"It's possible, and to be fair the role would probably suit a man of Lister's lack of moral calibre. But I suppose we must forgive him his mental incompetence if we are to rise above him. And, as you say, his threads are fine indeed, but they don't fit him anywhere near so well as Amelia Greys. Now there's a woman I wouldn't mind working under."

"Lister doesn't have her figure. Anyway, it's hardly the same thing. She'd look good wearing a bin-bag. He wouldn't look good in anything."

I think back to the sight of her that morning, strutting down the corridor like a catwalk model. "Did you see those heels? And who was she winking at?"

"Well it wasn't me," says Raul. "I'm fat, unfit, and married."

"And I'm fifty next birthday."

"So what? Can you really have lost the art of innocent flirtation, Timothy? Flirtation is what keeps us all young."

"I'm hoping an hour of Tai Chi a day is what will keep me young, Raul. In my experience women simply age you."

"Yes. An intriguing paradox. A woman ages a man, but equally a man needs a woman,.."

"Like a fish needs a bicycle."

"You've been too long celibate, my friend. Have you tried online dating yet?"

"Raul, we're old artists, you and I. You paint, while I'm writing probably the worst semi-autobiographical novel ever written. One that only my online state-salaried snooper is going to read. We don't do women."

"Speak for yourself. I do them all the time – metaphorically speaking of course. And so should you, though with less emphasis on the metaphorical. Tell me, who is your current muse?"

I hesitate to divulge, but in his flippant asides Raul often speaks much wisdom. "I dreamed she was a vicar last night."

"Seriously? " He widens his eyes into great bulls-eyes of surprise. "This is new. And interesting. And possibly perverted, but tell me more."

"She's quite good looking, in a mature sort of way."

"Well of course. Aren't they all?" He grins, wags his finger knowingly. "That's simply our age my friend."

"And I think I've dreamed of her before. Or it may just be the once. I need to re enter the dream and ask her some questions."

"So what's the problem? I mean, apart from the fact she's not real?"

"You can't shag a vicar, Raul."

"Well, that was my first thought, but why not? So far as I know the Anglican priesthood has not taken vows of chastity. If it were my dream I'd say she means you need to get laid, that it's more than your physical well-being riding on this; it's also spiritual. Shall I ask Amelia how she feels about it?"

"About what?"

"About getting laid, with you. Better a real woman you can shag than one you can literally only dream of shagging."

"In case you'd forgotten, Amelia's married, and also for good measure currently rumoured to be having an affair with Strickland's deputy,... you know, what's his name? I doubt she'd have the time to fit another lover in, though at my age I probably wouldn't take up much of her time. A couple of minutes a month ought to suffice."

Raul is incredulous. "You mean she's having it away with Ratface? Since when?"

"They've been at it for months. Don't you listen to gossip? Even the kids are buzzing with it. It'll be interesting to see what happens when Strickland finds out."

"Well, its obvious. Ratface is for the sack, and Amelia, having unambiguously demonstrated her wanton nature will be invited to a private ticking off which involves the unzipping of Strickland's trousers,... and hers,..." Raul gives a mock shudder,... "Unthinkable,... but if she's really gadding about with that tedious self inflated buffoon, I've seriously underestimated the depth of her compassion, also her generosity. All the better. You can be assured she won't take things too seriously, thus allowing you time to experience all the charms of a beautiful woman again, without the elongated shadow of the long term spoiling anything. And if you can win her away from Ratface, you might just be sparing her defilement at the hands of our Nemesis. Indeed, this has escalated into a matter of utmost urgency. I shall speak with her at the next opportunity."

"Don't you dare."

He smiles. "Very well, but only if you agree to eat with us this evening, to celebrate the beginning of another blessed summer break. Dora is cooking an heroically huge Shepherd's Pie and has been stocking up on ingredients for weeks." He pats the well-rounded protuberance of his stomach. "You'll be doing me a favour, saving me from morbid obesity and an early grave."

"I'll be glad to. But no alcohol. I'm driving in the morning."

"Of course. I thought you'd given up anyway."

"I have."

"And you are escaping the metropolis, as usual?"

"A run up to the cabin."

He sighs in disapproval. "You know, my fear is that one day you will decide not to return, and I shall visit you there to find your emaciated cadaver rigidified into a meditation pose, while your vital self remains lost in the woods of another bizarre dream."

"Lost in the woods? Yes,... that's possible. But the peace and quiet will help. I need to understand this phase of my life Raul. I feel the emptiness of the world, and I fear it,..."

"We all fear it, Timothy. When a man is young he thinks he can change the world. With middle age comes cynicism upon realising he cannot."

"I'm still hoping there's an answer in my dreams."

"And well there might be. But your dreams have already told you the reason for your angst, Timothy. They tell you to stop wasting your life in this menagerie. Our time is over. We are no longer required. We are obsolete. Our world is gone, our vision never was, it failed to live and now we stand in the way of those who would change things. Yet we are still men, still capable of greatness, given the right circumstances."

"I know we still matter, Raul, if only by virtue of our continuing presence, but our voices carry an ever diminishing weight. You reach a certain age and you might as well be sitting there mute for all the difference you can make. I don't get it. Where the Hell do we fit in any more?"

"We don't," he says. "I used to think that we had been outpaced by the world, but now I realise it is more that we have outgrown it. So we might as well leave the world as it is. What we need is somewhere else to go."

"Such as?"

He shrugs. "You have put your finger on the malaise of the

western world, my friend. In truth I do not know. I'm relying on you to discover it, and come tell me."

Chapter 5

5:15 and the school has long ago emptied of pupils, and staff who are mostly gone by 4:00 these days. Only management remains, and me. I'm sitting alone at my desk, eyes resting in the warm dark sanctuary of my palms. There is little danger of being disturbed here; the English department is a forlorn outpost, rarely frequented after hours. Lister, head of department will be schmoozing with Strickland and Ratface. I have had emails from all three this afternoon, banal diktats on this and that and none of them to do with the business of teaching. It amuses me that, considering we are a specialist language college, all three appear to have learned their English spellings and grammar from chat forums.

I'm playing binaural beats through my buds, shamanic frequency, 4.5 Hz, alpha-rhythm inducing. It clears the fog from the images on the screen behind my eyes, gives them a motion of their own. I see the standing stone sharply delineated, see the animated patterns of dappled sunlight playing over its surface. I've been like this for a while, trying to coax back the image of my vicar, my priestess, but I'm trying too hard and she keeps melting. Only the stone and the forest remain stable. I can hear the leaves moving in the breeze and the white noise of the distant falls. Then I'm thinking I can smell her, something aromatic above the pungent earth-scent of leaf mould and ramsons.

Is that,... Chanel No 5?

It's unusual that I can smell things so sharply in the vision state - I'm particularly observant of scent these days, being a recovering anosmic, but I can normally tell the difference between a scent that is imagined and one that is actually sensed. It's definitely Chanel No 5. My wife hated it, but only I think because I was attracted to it. Come to think of it, she took instinctively against anything I was fond of. Some people are like that, aren't they? only reassured of their own existence if they can pour scorn on the fact of someone else's. Either that or she was simply resentful of my sterility.

Why can I smell it now?

What is its significance, Lewis?

The scent is stabilising, filling my senses, while all I see with the inner eye is the standing stone. Try as I might, I can coax no other association from the dream. I take a breath and open my eyes to

find Miss (Mrs?) Rayworth (Religious/moral studies) sitting across the desk from me. She's watching like one might watch a fish in a tank, with a quiet curiosity. She has a slightly cross-eyed focus, which lends her a peculiar intensity. I give a start, and yank the buds from my ears

I'm embarrassed, yes, also beginning to sweat a little on account of it, but this is very interesting, and curiously portentous.

Miss Rayworth, up close!

She has long black hair, mad cascades of it, and such volume! It's like it's never been cut in her life, and it has the untidy texture of dried straw, as if it lacks care. Also there's the shadow of a moustache, and, God forgive me, but I'm making a Freudian association here and imagining a bush of the hairiest proportions - one that a man might get lost in for days, should he be so inclined,...

Which I most certainly am not, doctor.

The suit looks like it came from her mother's wardrobe, and her blouse, buttoned up tight to the throat, is both chaste, and defiantly un-ironed. Miss Rayworth? I would never have associated her with Chanel No 5. Yet there we are, Lewis.

First impressions?

"Is everything all right, Mr. Magowan?"

"Em,... yes,... I was just,.... resting my eyes. I thought everyone had gone."

"Obviously. So did I. Why haven't you? Or are you a slave to your job like me?"

She graces me with the twitch of a smile. *I'm being sarcastic,* she's saying, which is curious; do I detect in her a streak of dry humour? It's like she knows me already, knows something about me, that I will share with her in this seditious talk, that we will both brave the Billybats and the Tasers together, hands clasped in a last minute gesture of solidarity.

We wag our Agincourt fingers as the policemen charge.

What? Slow down, Timothy.

Curious metaphor, not unpleasant.

But solidarity against what?

Ah,... I think I understand; I intuit she's been talking to Raul. Raul makes it his business to flirt with all the women on the staff, regardless of age or how fearsome their reputation – indeed I'm told the more fearsome the better. He's been telling her about me. I feel

my ears go red.

"I was just,... finishing something off," I explain. But this sounds weak, possibly also a little guarded?

What does she want from me?

She nods, clearly unconvinced, looks anxious for a moment, then hands me my 'phone. "Sorry for startling you. The office was closing. Miss Somerville asked if I'd return this to you - otherwise you would have had to wait until next term for it."

"Em,.. thank you. Yes,... that would have been,... tiresome."

"Wouldn't it just."

I've not seen her up close before, not really paid her much attention. She has rather a studious face, introspective, not unattractive, though disguised somewhat by a pair of big glasses that look as if they were chosen specifically for their ugliness. She also has freckles and a pale, smooth skin that suggests she's far younger than the centenarian way she dresses. She's forty perhaps? Or possibly a very well-kept forty five?

"It's a stupid rule," she says. "My theory is Strickland only brought it in to stop us texting and loafing on Facebook during school hours."

"I'd not thought of that. Never actually caught up with Facebook though." I refrain from telling her I have no one I can think of whom I'd want to text either.

"I know," she says. "I checked. I can't find any mention of you on Facebook at all."

"You checked? Really?"

She laughs. "No,... I'm joking. *Obviously*. I never caught up with Facebook either." She pauses, sighs, then takes a breath, as if steadying herself for an important announcement. "You need to know Raul's invited me round to his place tonight for dinner."

"Oh?"

She lets slip a smile. "Obviously he means for us to be married, Mr Magowan. I just thought it polite to mention it in case you wanted to duck out."

"Ah,... and there was me thinking he was setting me up with Amelia Grey." A joke, Lewis, but will she find it funny? What was it Marylin Monroe said? *If you can make a woman laugh, you can make her do anything?*

She frowns, but not unpleasantly. "And that would have been all right, I suppose?"

"Actually,... not really."

"Why not? Is there something wrong with you? I thought all the male staff were palpitating for a brush-past with Amelia Grey."

I feel a rush of something pleasant; I don't know this woman at all; our rooms have adjoined each other this past term, but we've shared nothing beyond the occasional good morning, and then under the ever critical scrutiny of our charges - and I'm no good with women. Heavens! How awkward! What's her first name? I've heard it somewhere: Rachel? Rita?

No,... it's Rebecca.

"Well, not all men are comfortable with overt displays of sexuality," I tell her.

"Is that why you're so relaxed with me?"

Now that was definitely a joke, Timothy! There's a crinkle at the corners of her mouth, and her eyes. Yes, a joke! Self deprecating. Sharp. How charming!

"No need to answer that," she says. "And impossible without insulting me anyway."

"Then I shan't."

"So, will you be coming?"

"I've already promised, and Dora will be disappointed if I don't. I'm sorry, Miss Rayworth, Raul does this with all the single members of staff. He describes them to Dora and she pairs them off. It never works out, but they have endless hours of fun plotting these things, and we get a good meal into the bargain. If we smile and play along, they'll both be very happy."

"Sounds like a plan."

She crosses her palms on the crook of her cane, pushes herself up, then walks away, slowly. Her limp is pronounced now, as if her leg has gone to sleep. I notice her feet below her long skirt. She wears a smart patent court-shoe on the left, and a cheap flip-flop on the right, toes painted funereal black, as are her fingernails. Her lameness intrigues me. The cane taps as she walks, yet I did not hear her enter, and I'm sure the volume through my buds was not that loud – as I did not want Lister surprising me. Can one be both lame and stealthy?

"Don't forget to bring a bottle," she says.

"I don't drink," I tell her.

"Well, I'm afraid I do," she replies. "In fact bring two. I drink a lot these days."

I watch as she goes. Curious archetype: the lame woman, the ugly duckling - except she's too old for a duckling. She's more of an ugly duck then, a creature for whom further transformation is unlikely. I think back to the vicar, another curious archetype - this one being beauty unobtainable for having devoted herself to God. And now Rebecca! What is she? Beauty unrecognised? Beauty skin deep? Something overlooked beneath the dust and creases of self-neglect? One might think that was the case, except I suspect something inauthentic about her, something of a Hollywood movie about her dishevelment. She has only to comb her hair, change her ugly specs for designer frames, or contacts, slip herself into a silken sheath of a gown and, what with that ample bosom, she could easily pass for Rita Hayworth, doyenne of silver screen.

Yes, Lewis: Forties movie queen and dancing girl. Google: Hayworth, Gilda.

An actress!

Rebecca is *acting*? She is not what she seems, or she is *more* than she seems. Or am I being challenged to accept someone as they are, and see where it leads? What? Oh, for heavens sake, Timothy, wake up. Haven't you realised it yet? You suddenly have a blind date tonight with Miss Rayworth (Religious/Moral studies).

Now that's definitely worth waking up for.

Chapter 6

Early evening, driving to Raul's house, the radio is telling me of a girl abducted and murdered. A suspect has been detained, described as a loner, a man who kept himself to himself, a teacher at the girl's school. The tabloids have scented blood, and sex, and want more details, but details are thus far lacking so they've begun to make them up. They have invented neighbours who say they are shocked at the thought they've been living near someone so sick and strange all this time. Sexual perversion, Lewis.

The man has yet to be charged with anything.

And they could be describing me.

I think of Janice Iddon, all cow eyes and pools of sweat, making vindictive accusations, and all because I broke her heart by being blind to her infatuation. And there but for the grace of God,... the teacher's nightmare.

Then there's more economic collapse, more of how little money there is nowadays to spend on anything good and decent and civilised. The usual declinism. Then there's more war, and finally a novelty closing item about a huge meteorite making a close pass with the earth, followed by a banal alarmist discussion of the probability it will strike.

I had forgotten the perennial subject of Armageddon: Global Warming, 2012, Y2K, Bird Flu, uncontrolled immigration. Yes, I like it: *an earth shattering meteorite impact!* BRING IT ON!

It has something of Hollywood about it.

I think of the standing stone, something passing close.

Close enough to touch?

No, too vague, Timothy, no resonance, look elsewhere,...

Rita Hayworth!

Sorry, Lewis, I'm jumping around here, which must be making you dizzy, but I can't help reflecting on the resemblance of Rita to Rebecca,... possibly self constructed, even delusional, but I'm looking forward to testing the hypothesis when we meet again.

So,...

Raul greets me at the door. Note how he's now wearing grey flannels and a conventional shirt, clean white and pressed, like any regular guy. His shorts and floral patterned shirt are not a matter of personal preference, you see? They are a bayonet shoved up

Strickland's arse. Dora emerges from the kitchen and hugs me like a sister, though we've only met on a few occasions. She is fragrant, her perfume an exotic orchid. I can also smell Chanel.

Rebecca is here then.

I find her in the back room, a large, light and airy space where Raul hangs his work, or at least the examples Dora considers suitable for the eyes of visitors, to whit there is a tastefully reclining nude that looks like Amelia Grey. Dear me! Does Dora mean to tickle other appetites this evening? I'm surprised by it, but only because it's so unlike Raul's other work. It's almost romantic, except there's a look of hopelessness too, of despair about this woman.

Could it really be Amelia?

Rebecca is studying it.

"Don't show too much interest," I warn her, "or Raul will gift it to you."

She's wearing a long summer frock, cherry red and crumpled, like she just pulled it from the bottom of the washing basket. Her hair is piled above her neck and held in place with what looks like bits of spaghetti. She leans heavily on her stick and turns. I note she's now wearing a matching pair of cheap flip-flops. And I know this will sound unlikely to you Lewis, having Googled Gilda by now, I hope, but the resemblance is striking - at least to me - and I'm puzzled by it.

Am I sickening for something?

"You don't like it?" she asks.

"Em,.."

She laughs. "You're blushing, Mr Magowan."

"Just hot."

"No, *she's* hot. You're embarrassed. You know,.. it looks a lot like,.."

"I was thinking the same thing myself, but,... I'm sure it's not. It *can't* be, can it?"

"Well, Amelia wouldn't be the first woman on the staff to disrobe in Raul's private studio. Or so I'm told."

"What? Really?"

"Of course. Didn't you know?" She laughs again, presumably at my crimson face. "I'm sorry, Mr. Magowan."

"Sorry?"

"For gate-crashing your evening. And making you blush."

"It's all right. I blush at the slightest thing. Always have. As for

the evening, I'm sure it will be all the more entertaining for your company."

"Well, I couldn't resist. I was curious about Raul and Dora,... and about you."

"Me?"

"We've taught next door to one another all year, but we never speak. I decided it was time we did. The awkwardness was killing me. I'm the kind of girl who has to be open and easy with everyone. But there's a reluctance in you that I take as a serious challenge."

"Yes,... I'm sorry about that. I really should make more of an effort. I suppose I'm just not good with adults any more. I'm told it happens to all teachers eventually."

"Ah, then I'd better quit while I'm ahead. I teach religious and moral studies by the way."

"I know."

"And you teach English." She's not asking me when she says this. She's telling me she knows.

"That's right."

"Raul also tells me you have the ways of a shaman about you."

Is she testing me or teasing me now? It's the sort of thing people say just before they start demonstrating how superior they are in the "critical thinking" department. I become defensive and deny it at once, but without demeaning the role, for I have the utmost respect for it: "I've neither the guts nor the calling for that kind of work," I tell her.

"That's not what I've heard."

She turns to look once more at the picture. "I wonder if he actually has someone pose for him - you know - sit for hours and hours like that, or if he works from photographs. Can you imagine the scandal if they got out?"

She holds up her phone and snaps a quick shot of the nude, gives me a challenging flash of her eyes. "Often hard to imagine what people are really like, isn't it? I mean without their clothes on."

Is she flirting now? She can hardly mean she's wondering what *I* look like. There's nothing to shout about there these days. I blush again.

"I was speaking metaphorically," she says.

"Of course." I knew that!

Her turn to be embarrassed now. She begins to fiddle

unconsciously with a silver crucifix at her throat. I wonder at the religious dimension, and its connection with the dream. Does she just teach it, or does she live her religion? My vicar again, Lewis, teasing me aside into a momentary reverie. I'm afraid my gaze lingers a little too long on the crucifix, and I worry she's thinking I'm staring into the impressive chasm of her décolletage – which of course I am not.

"Convent girl," she says, then sets the cross down flat. "But before I taught I was a dancer, you know?" She taps the floor with her cane. "Hard to believe, isn't it? Now I can barely stretch far enough to pull my knickers on."

"A dancer?"

"Theatre," she says. "Nothing filthy." She smiles."Slipped on a wet stage. Ended up in the orchestra pit. Then it was six weeks in traction and the last ten years hobbling about. Haven't danced since. Story of my life. What's your excuse?" She says all this with a sparkle of humour rather than self pity.

"Me? I've always been a teacher."

"But what makes a teacher become a shaman?"

"I'm not, really,... Raul,... he has a colourful imagination. He exaggerates everything for the purposes of his art, to get a,... I don't know,... a reaction. A shaman is someone comfortable in their culture, comfortable also in the apparent chaos of the imaginary world and its interface in the liminal zones. Me,... I'm anything but comfortable. Our culture forbids us from being comfortable. It relies on our discomfort and a permanent craving so we'll stop listening to our dreams."

She thinks for a moment, staring at me all the while, then nods. I find her unsettling, but only because I have the impression she's taking me seriously. Most people don't, including me.

"And dreams are important, are they?" she asks, but I think she already knows the answer to this.

"Without our dreams how else are we to divine our purpose? Unless we listen to our dreams the daemons who live in our heads will break down the doors and drive us mad."

"And you say you're not a shaman?"

"Any westerner who makes that claim is most likely a poseur and a fool."

"I see where you're coming from. You don't like labels. Neither do I. No need to be defensive by the way. I'm not a sceptic.

Shamanism, or whatever you choose to call it, interests me, that's all. I don't just teach Christianity, you know? It's all about comparative religion these days."

"Look, I don't know what Raul's told you about me."

"Not much,... just hints. Like the time you cured him of an eye infection."

"That was a coincidence. He challenged me to do it. I've no idea what happened. It was obviously going to get better on its own."

"Raul doesn't think so. And where he comes from, it's okay to be a healer."

"Well not where I come from, unless you're a fully qualified doctor."

"Hmm. And I don't know many of those who are particularly good healers either, beyond broken bones and stitches, which to my mind is more a sort of craft. You're not quite *out* yet are you? Sorry. And there was me all this time, thinking you were just a dusty old English teacher."

She's likes to tease. She has a playful, Puckish spirit, and considerable grit, and I do like her, Lewis. She's easy to be with; no need to be guarded; no need for lies to preserve my persona - indeed, quite the opposite; with Rebecca, I must keep tearing off the mask she offers, in order to go on safely recognising myself.

Dora calls us to dinner and Rebecca moves ahead of me to the door.

"I'm sorry," I tell her.

"Oh?"

"About the dancing."

She smiles. "I was getting too old for that game anyway," she says. "Perhaps it was fate's way of telling me to move on."

"Trouble is, we're not always ready to move on, are we? Even though we say we are."

Her gaze narrows. "True."

It's a fine, warm evening, late July. We eat outside at the sun-bleached, hardwood table in Raul's garden. It's a rural setting, a detached seventies dormer, the height of middle class chic in its day. A long garden runs out to meadows and hills. Bees buzz lazily among the starry heads of cream and red honeysuckle. Their monotonic meanderings remind me of Strickland's lecture that morning. Raul is thinking of it too because he teases Rebecca for having succumbed to the suit. She flicks back her hair and pulls off

her glasses. Her eyes are hazel and liquid and very beautiful.

"I dress like a bag-lady, Raul," she says. "That suit belonged to my grandmother. But, it's a suit. I conform, but without looking like a city clone. I also wear odd shoes on purpose, and shuffle around like a cripple, and Strickland's afraid of saying anything, afraid of my disability, like most people are - afraid of being seen as politically incorrect if they challenge me on it."

They are two Pucks together, but rather than annoy, they seem to connect, become a team and therefore present double the trouble. I wonder if Raul is thinking of painting her. I wonder if he already has.

She goes on: "If I were you and Mr Magowan here, I'd be searching the thrift shops or commissioning theatrical designers for the most bizarre and out of date fashions you can find. You, Raul,... I see you in a double breasted pin-stripe de-mob suit - you know, late 1940's era, complete with rakish Fedora and spats. The fact you're black also counts in your favour. Strickland is a racist, of course, but afraid of showing it. The ruling classes waste no time in exploiting our fears, so we must waste no time in exploiting theirs. Once upon a time we gathered into trades unions for safety. Nowadays of course all we have is our wits."

Raul tips back his head and roars with laughter. Rebecca is accepted to his bosom as a kindred spirit, a fellow revolutionary. "And Timothy here? What would we have him wear?"

She turns to me and makes a show of appraising my looks. "Mr. Magowan is so much older than you, I think, at least in spirit. His is a very old soul indeed. Very turn of the century - nineteenth that is, very,... Dickensian. Don’t you think? No offence, Mr Magowan, but you were born this way. I see you in a bow tie perhaps, button down collar, and a frock coat. Mutton chop whiskers too would not go amiss, if you can manage them."

Raul applauds. "Timothy, what do you say? Shall we have you surgically removed from your tweeds at last?"

"I'd rather get sacked than be parted from my Harris Tweed."

"You don't mean that. Teaching's in your blood. What else would you do?"

"I don't know,... the only thing keeping me in teaching these days is cowardice and old age, and the thought of my pension pot maturing, and not wanting to do anything to rock the boat and ruin my transition into a safe retirement - the sooner the better. Then I

can wag my Daily Mail at the world from a distance like every other former middle class professional. But where's the honour in that?"

He frowns. "You could be describing any one of us over forty. Any professional. Any teacher. And I'm sorry, Timothy, but you do not read the Daily Mail. You are a Guardian man, born and bred, if you bothered to take a paper at all, which I doubt. You are strictly BBC, much abbreviated of course through the aegis of its Android App."

"You might be right."

"I know I'm right."

"But what we do now isn't teaching, is it? We deliver a syllabus up for consumption, and we tick-box progress to a very narrow model of reality, one that suits the majority of conformers but refuses to recognise the diversity and the individual importance of human beings. Getting the sack could be just what I need to make me do something else with my life. Something real. Something worth it. I have some savings, and the bit of money my parent's left me, I could *do* something, instead of all this,... waiting. I mean what am I *waiting* for, Raul?"

I'm forgetting Rebecca's presence - so used to being candid with Raul it's hard to be anything else. She's curious, flicks her specs up once more and runs her eyes over me, though I suppose all she can see of me now is an unfocussed blob, which sounds about right: Timothy Magowan, unfocused blob of a man.

"What would you do?" she asks.

"I don't know. None of us do. Like I was saying earlier, we haven't the dreams to guide us any more. We're all of us lost, Rebecca. Outside of our dwindling middle class enclave lies only the same minimum wage as everyone else, and nowadays even middle class Englishmen are relying on foodbanks and thrift shops to get by - and those are the ones in work. How the unemployed manage I shudder to think. And even our brightest young ones are reduced to taking unpaid internships on the mere *promise* of a salary at some vague point in the future. Our system has failed them. Worse than failed them - it has betrayed them, robbed them of their future and dressed it up as a privilege."

She's unimpressed with my blathering. "But what would you *do*."

"About reforming the system? Heaven knows. Short of discovering massive gold deposits under the West Pennines and distributing the resultant bonanza evenly and secretly among the

poor, without informing the banks, I don't know."

"I meant, if you could do something else with your life, what would it be?"

"Oh, that,... I'd take the time to think, read, meditate, write."

She lets slip a little smirk. "Become a writer, you mean?"

I worry now she thinks me naive. "No,... everyone assumes when they know I write stuff they think I'm a frustrated novelist, on the trail of a best seller, but I'm not. In fact I want the opposite of that. I want a shot at complete obscurity. I want to wake up one morning and there not be another soul who knows or cares I'm alive. But I'd still want to write about it. Privately - well, between me and my state salaried snooper, who I call Lewis, by the way."

Rebecca is puzzled: "Lewis?"

Raul explains: "The only other person, besides Timothy, with access to his Cloud account."

"Ah,... clever," she says. "A little crazy, but clever. Why so inward looking?"

"Because that's the way I've been heading all my life. And if it wasn't for the awkward fact of having to earn a living, I could simply get on with it."

Raul chips in: "But do we have to earn a living? Is that not a myth also?"

"Live without money and not starve? That's the holy grail of every hippy who ever graced the earth. But they all sell out in the end. They have to."

"Tribal societies manage it."

Rebecca concurs. "They share everything," she says. "Even their dreams - perhaps their dreams more than anything. And they are the happiest of people."

"But they don't number very many. We number in the hundreds of millions. Egalitarian societies formed out of disgruntled hippies will always fall foul of Orwell's observation that while we agree all pigs should be created equal, some will always be created more equal than others."

"You're saying our society is Orwellian?"

"No, it's much worse than that. Huxley had it about right. We've been spun an illusion, and we believe in it totally, unaware that actually all we are is slaves. I don't know what will happen. I'd like to imagine a mass awakening, a flowering of consciousness and mindfulness that transforms us overnight into spiritually

enlightened beings. It's our only hope. But short of a massive natural disaster that shocks us all to the core, I don't see that happening any time soon, do you?"

She thinks a moment, looks sad and shakes her head. "Probably not."

Over dinner, Rebecca drinks the best part of a bottle of Beaujolais. It's the wine I brought, and though there are others on the table, I note she drinks it exclusively. This puzzles me, and I fear I'm reading more into it than perhaps I should. Meanwhile I drink fizzy water. It tastes sour, but the alternatives are alcoholic or sweet.

Then we are at ease on deck chairs looking out over the plain of Lancashire as the sun goes down. Raul is teasing me, pointing at my glass and telling Rebecca I am a recovering alcoholic. Dora jabs his arm. Some things one should not tease about, she's saying, but for Raul, nothing is off limits.

Rebecca takes him seriously, glass half raised to her lips."I'm sorry Mr. Magowan, I didn't know. And here I am drinking like a fish."

"It's not that," I tell her. "I used to drink, but lately I've discovered I'm allergic, worst luck. Been allergic to it all my life and not realised. If I take a glass of wine it kills my sense of smell. I've been anosmic for decades."

She's intrigued. "What's that like - not to smell anything?"

"Like viewing the world in black and white."

"And what can you smell now?"

"Perfume, the meadows, your wine, the lavender over there."

"Perhaps you have to lose it to appreciate it," she muses. She moves her nose to the rim of her glass and sniffs. "Yes,... I can smell the wine, but only vaguely. You can really smell my perfume? I don't notice it now."

"Chanel number 5. Dora is wearing Clinique. And Raul, like me, you've always had a penchant for Lynx Africa deodorant."

Dora laughs and applauds.

The dusk drains slowly to midnight blue and the photoelectric twinkle-lights come on like fireflies to dot the night. Raul burns citronella candles to keep the midges at bay. I am easy with Raul and Dora, with Rebecca too, it seems, though she insists on calling me "Mr. Magowan". Indeed, it's the most relaxed I've been with any woman. It reminds me of the better years of my marriage to

Miranda, the years when she had stopped demanding I make her life better, the years she had simply let me be. And all right, that was just before she told me we were finished.

Rebecca will need a taxi to get her home, and I shall offer her a ride. She'll refuse, saying it's too much trouble for me, and I'll not press her on it. This far I can see ahead. Beyond it my life remains a mystery.

"You're going to the cabin tomorrow?" asks Dora.

"Yes."

"All summer, again?" Her eyes grow sad. "Aren't you lonely there on your own."

Ouch, Dora,... that was clumsy. Rebecca's not going to take pity on me and invite me to spend the holidays with her, is she?

"Not really," I tell her. This isn't strictly true; I do feel my solitude when I'm there, but it only counts as loneliness when you do not enjoy it. "I like the quiet."

Raul grumbles that my whole life is quiet, too quiet, that I would be better going to the Costa del Sol and for just once in my life getting blind drunk and emphatically laid. He tells me this every year.

"And you Raul?" I ask. "What are your plans?"

"Oh,... we're hoping to get a late booking on a flight to Durban, visit Dora's family. The former colony, former haven of Apartheid is, alas, ironically, one of the few places on the continent of Africa I can now walk without fear of kidnap and torture. Why don't you come? Both of you. Don't think about it - just say yes. Be spontaneous."

I know he's not serious in this, only challenging, as always, probing for weaknesses, winkling them out, dragging them into the light, looking for a reaction. I used to avoid him on account of this, but now I find it is one of his most endearing qualities. In knowing Raul, one inevitably becomes more intimately acquainted with oneself. "Oh,... it's very kind, Raul,... but my plans are laid."

Rebecca blushes, grows sensitive, perhaps afraid Raul and Dora's machinations will become increasingly gauche now the wine had loosened their inhibitions. I'm afraid of it too, and would not see her distressed by it. She declares the lateness, thanks her hosts, then lights up the night with her 'phone. She scrolls the clouds in search of a taxi.

Make it fast, Lewis.

"Perhaps Timothy will drive you home," says Raul, barely able to hide his smile. I look daggers at him, and Rebecca says she would not put me to any trouble. I assure her it would be no trouble, but do not press her on it. She lifts the 'phone to her ear, and speaks to the taxi operator.

So,...

We are waiting in the front garden for the taxi, Rebecca and I. Raul and Dora have made a strategic withdrawal, and I'm left alone to experience the strangeness of this woman. She's been a presence in my life for a year, thus far largely unnoticed. Now however, she seems centre-stage of a sudden, and I'm wondering about that. In the darkness, as a last quarter moon rises, she puts her hand on my arm, pats it gently. She's clearly a little tipsy. "You must regain your soul, Mr. Magowan."

"My soul? I thought our souls were the one thing we could not lose."

"Oh, we can lose them," she says. "Lose them in the past. At least parts of them. I lost mine on the stage of the West End - or rather I left her there. To dance on stage before an audience is as close to flying as you can get without wings, you know? A part of myself is still there, looking at what's left of me, dragging my leg around, teaching moral and religious studies to teenagers who couldn't care less. She's revolted with me, refuses to join in with our future, wants only to dance. She hides in my dreams, refuses to lend me her energy, refuses to make me whole." She gives me a quizzical look, again slightly cross eyed in its intensity. Why does that look stir me so? "Do you understand this?" she asks. "I *know* you understand this!"

"I do understand, actually."

And I understand because soul loss is partly a shaman's remit. Doctors have no interest in it, yet the body cannot live without the soul, and the more denuded it becomes, the less we are alive. "I'm looking for pieces of myself too, and you're right, we do leave bits of it scattered in the past. By the time we reach old age, it's a wonder there's anything left at all."

She smiles. "And you left a fair sized chunk of it in your marriage? Most men do. Raul told me you're divorced."

"I suppose a part of me's still there, yes. And other places,... like the way we used to teach, years ago, unlike now when we're told how to teach and are constantly scrutinised by pompous suits

looking for our incompetence, when all I have to do is hold a mirror to them. I mean if they were any good as teachers they'd be teaching, wouldn't they?"

She laughs. "You really have a downer on it don't you. Do you still take it so personally? So seriously? The job, I mean."

"Personally yes, seriously no, at least not any longer. Another fault, I know. And bitterness is rather unbecoming."

"You know, you speak *so* old fashioned sometimes. I came to it late, the teaching; first there was the dancing, and,... well,... I tried other stuff, before settling on it. I've no illusions. The money's not bad, and you have to admit the holidays are very good."

"Yes,... all of that's true."

"So,... can you not think of it as a paying hobby, while you get on with the more important tasks in your life?"

"Which are?"

"Shamanism and writing about it, of course."

"I told you I'm not a shaman. I'm more of a,... an old mystic, that's all,... like the way I speak - old fashioned, obsolete."

Why is this coming out of me? Self pity? Self analysis? Hardly the way to impress a woman, Timothy. Wait,... *I want to impress this woman?*

Yes, it seem I do.

That's new.

"Ah!" she says. "There we are! I knew it! Mysticism is good. Just start believing in it. And in yourself. Promise me?"

She pauses to allow a hiccup to rise, covers her mouth with her black painted fingertips. Excuses herself. She's perhaps more tipsy than I thought, and I should humour her: "All right. I promise."

"Good boy. Now, is your cabin in the woods as primitive as it sounds?"

"No. Raul teases me about it, but he's never been there, never seen it. It's very modern, actually, very comfortable and self contained. I've spent a fortune on it. Very eco-freindly. I go there most weekends and holidays."

"Remote, detached, off the grid?"

"Yes."

"Like you then. And it's actually yours? Your own place? You don't rent it or anything?"

Why is she asking me this? "It's mine, yes. It came to me from my aunt. When my wife and I split, she took everything, and I let

her. Everything except my pension and the cabin."

"Why?"

"She hated it. Too quiet. And it's complicated to sell - a covenant on the land, which means it can only be bequeathed to family, so as an asset it's practically worthless - as for the pension, I guess she took pity on me,... we're still good friends,... no bad feeling or anything."

"No,... I mean why did you let her take everything?"

"Oh, guilt, I suppose."

"You had an affair?"

I find the idea amusing. "Heavens no,... I mean,... not really."

"You either did or you didn't."

"I neglected her."

"Oh?"

"When a man falls inside his own head it's worse for his family than him spending all his time down the pub. I mean he's still visible, but not quite there, you know? And Miranda expected me to make her happy. But the truth is no one can make another person happy. That has to come from inside yourself, and she was incapable of it."

Rebecca's nodding like she agrees with me, but how can she? Beyond babies, I've never understood what it is that women want from men. "No affair then," she says, as if to confirm it for her own satisfaction. "It's just,... well,... there are rumours,... not that I listen to gossip, and not that it's any of my business of course. And I'm slightly drunk, and won't remember much of this in the morning anyway, so you must forgive my boldness."

Yes,... that's something else I'm discovering the novelty of - being sober in the company of others who are drunk. "Is that what they're saying in the staff room? Miranda taught at the school as well, you see? She moved on after the divorce, but I'm still not very popular with some of the women on account of that."

"No, you're not."

"So, grumpy old Magowan had an affair, did he? Well, an affair would have been simpler to be honest. I was writing to my muse, actually. Not a real woman, you understand? Someone I'd dreamed up. Then I found she would write back. And what she said made sense,... though I'm painfully aware none of this will be making any sense to you."

"I wouldn't count on it. I'm familiar with muse psychology."

"Than maybe you could explain it to me."

She shrugs. "You channelled her."

"I prefer to say I *imagined* her."

"Same thing. What was her name?"

I can't believe they're still gossiping about that in the staff room. Could it be I'm still sensitive about that period? I destroyed those notebooks, can barely remember their content now, but oh, how we talked, she and I. She was the first of my lovers in the dream-time.

"I called her M."

"So, your wife found the letters between you and M?"

"In a nutshell."

"And grossly misinterpreted them?"

"Yes."

Rebecca rolls her eyes. "Oh dear. Fancy not understanding a little thing like that? Normal people are *so* weird, aren't they?"

"Well, I think she understood it really. She just used it as a catalyst to break us up. Either way it was the right thing. Like I said, I'd neglected her for years. Some people aren't cut out for marriage, not even for relationships of anything but the most casual nature. That's me, you see? Too introverted, too inward looking. If she'd not done it, we'd still be locked in by the conventionality of it, lacking the courage to break up, and all the time growing more and more poisonous to one another. That's not living, that's dying in slow motion."

The darkness and the rural quiet are disturbed by headlights and the sound of tyres approaching. I don't want to let her go just yet. I want to talk to her some more, but there's a danger in it, a danger of stepping too far towards intimacy, of treating her as an archetype, as a goddess, a priestess, when all she is is a woman. Maybe if she remembers any of this in the morning, she'll be able to counter some of the stories still circulating - not that it matters much to me any more. People like their myths as simple as possible, and the truth is usually too complex for that.

"My taxi, I think."

"Yes."

"I've never had a man, Mr. Magowan. Convent girl, you see? Sex is guilt and all that, and I never married. I have a problem with intimacy too. I'm like you: inward looking, plus nowadays I'm hiding more scars under this dress than a butchered cow." The taxi pulls up. She turns. "Well,... it's been interesting talking to you. Let's

not be so reticent next term, eh? Say hello to me now and then. Who knows, we could even be friends."

"All right."

"I'm sorry to disappoint Raul and Dora, but you can tell them I won't be marrying you. Nothing personal. You seem lovely, and I do sense a kindred spirit in you. I'm serious, you know? I do think I could be your friend, and I think we both could use a friend. What do you say? Dare we risk a peck on the cheek to seal the bargain?"

"Too informal," I tell her. "You'd have to call me Timothy first, at least once."

She extends her hand. "We'll shake then. Good night, Mr. Magowan."

"All right. Good night, Ms Hayworth."

"Rayworth," she corrects, and I blush at my Freudian mistake. Why do I keep thinking I'm talking to Rita Hayworth?

She descends the path to the taxi and slips inside. I glimpse her parting smile and a hand, half raised by way of a wave. Then the night takes her, and I feel empty.

Rebecca Rayworth. Rita Hayworth.

I turn indoors to thank Dora and Raul, and take my leave of them.

Raul is grinning playfully. "Sorry, Timothy. I could not resist. I've imagined you and Rebecca getting it on all year."

"And there was me half expecting Amelia Grey."

He sighs. "I know, but I've changed my mind. Amelia would be no good for you. But Rebecca,... she has such a delightful spirit."

"I'll admit she seems spirited."

"And have you seen her eyes? Aren't they amazing! I would like to paint her. Do you think she'll go for it?"

"You mean you haven't asked her yet? Well, I think a nude would be out of the question. Too much of the convent still about her, she tells me. She also talks about scars, though how you can scar so badly from what sounds like a compound fracture and damaged muscles, I don't know."

"Perhaps we're talking of more than physical scars, Timothy."

"Then she's a broken doll, Raul. And that's too dangerous an archetype for either of us to be meddling with."

"Because we would rather toss her aside than play with her?"

"No, because we'd want to fix her. And she might not want, or even need fixing."

We part soberly and I turn back into the night, catching the scent of jasmine on the breeze, its sweetness mingling with the pepper of honeysuckle. I smell rain too, and the fleeting trail of Rebecca's Chanel leading into the void.

I can't fix her. One cannot transform an archetype. They are what they are, and it is us who must undergo the transformation, a transformation heralded by the constellation of that archetype. That is our real place in the scheme of things, Lewis. But I'm too old to change much, yet only that which changes remains true.

And that which cannot change always betrays the lie.

Chapter 7

Raul's house, it's detached rural calm, its atmosphere of domestic harmony, all of these things I take to be his reward for having overcome monstrous misfortune, to achieve a stable balance in life, for having married his muse early and stuck with her, and for choosing a muse who would not be jealous of other muses, either real or imagined.

By contrast my house on Curzon Street is a small mid-terrace, anonymous and cheap. This was the mill district of Middleton in its heyday - all red brick, staining now to black. The mills are gone of course, faded almost to the depth of myth, replaced by spacious DIY emporia, quick-fix garages and fat-burger outlets. The area steadfastly resists gentrification which, by and large, relies upon an affluent middle class, which is now in steadfast decline.

As I turn in to bed that evening, I make an accounting of my assets. As you're no doubt aware, Lewis, on paper I'm better off than many in my position. I have several hundred thousand sitting in the bank - from the sale of my parents' house, some years ago. Miranda did not get a share in that, having had the lack of foresight to insist on dissolving our affairs while my mother was still alive. Financial advisers pester me to invest it in this or that stock market scheme, but since the crash, they are a tainted brand, and bond interest rates have dwindled to nought. I leave the money in low interest easy-access savings, where its value erodes year on year. But it's still something. I do not therefore speak to you as one of the brave who would risk it all on a dream, careless if he crashed and burned, but rather as one who does not really care, as I could comfortably step aside from life at any time and still live, modestly, until my eighties. I would be entirely independent of society. What keeps me turning up for work then is a mystery.

The problem is, I still think of it as theirs: my mother, housewife and bringer up of one overly self conscious child, now a middle aged teacher running on automatic, and my father, forty eight years in the same factory, maintenance fitter, and gone, like the factory and the things he maintained, not five years after his retirement. I wear his long-service watch now, which they engraved for him - rather a fine, weighty Bernex. Like the man, it is reliable, has many complications, and patiently marks time, though for some as yet

unknown purpose.

I greatly admire his tenacity in the face of obscurity, and hope I shall approach my own end with as much grace as he. But of the surviving assets of my parents, I cannot bring myself to spend any of it on frivolities, nor less to fall back upon it as income because that would be to collapse upon their protection once more, even now, long after they have gone. It would not be to grow from the fertile ground they tilled with their lives. It would be to die myself, to shrivel up for want of purpose and direction.

No, I cannot use it to escape.

I make it sound like a fortune, don't I, when richer men would blithely gambol it on the horses in one mad weekend, and not mind its loss.

Apart from the money I have an old Volvo, worth no more than the tax disc by now. I also have the cabin - but that doesn't count - the covenant on the land dictating that the dwelling cannot be sold. I might pass it on if I had a child, but I do not. When I die the National Trust will demolish it.

And relationships? None. If I'm honest with myself I am lonely for a woman, but afraid of them at the same time, for though they can make a man's life, they can also be very difficult to live with. And at my age I can't be too careful. Once bitten, and all that.

Miranda is now married to the manager of Freshways supermarket. You'll find his shamelessly indiscreet persona on Facebook, and another, more restrained on Linkedin. The twain seem positively schizophrenic, but such is life. He was an intern when she met him, stocking shelves and falling over himself to impress with his customer friendliness. He has a charming demeanour and I can understand her attraction for him. I still see them about town. She has two girls by him, both growing now, and in them I'm sure she finds her purpose. If only I understood mine so well. I thought I did, but something changed. I should have died perhaps, but I'm still here, hanging on, which suggests my purpose is not yet done and surely the architect of my life would not taunt me with such a long wait,...

The Architect?

Yes, Lewis.

I speak of God. And God is presently teasing me with Rebecca.

I think of her now, playing on her crippled looks so as to defend herself against Strickland. She has guile. Raul has guts. I have

nothing. How am I to defend myself when Strickland turns his guns on me next term? There are many ways he can do this. Scrutiny is the favourite: books, lesson plans, scores,... all will be gone through with a fine toothed comb. Strange suits will be sent to sit in my lessons with clip-boards and stern expressions. They will be nobodies, but my mind will inflate them into intimidating interlocutors with electrodes and the power to fry my balls, like those bastards did to Raul.

And the strange thing in all of this is I don't need any of it. I could walk out. Never come back. Why then this quest for purpose in my work, when I appear so unsuited for it? Is it the thought of those forty eight years my father endured? Did I think I might be capable of the same, steady, uncomplaining stoicism? Or is it that I am afraid of what I would become without the brutal rationality of the day to day? Is it that I am afraid of my dreams swallowing me? You do not know my dreams Lewis, only what I have told you so far, and I have spared you much. My dreams will astound you.

You will not believe them!

I think that's it: the real world grounds me. If I fell back on the money, allowed myself the space to dream properly, my dreams would devour me.

Lying in bed, I feel the touch of Rebecca's hand on my arm. No, we are not lying in bed together just now. I am remembering this from the night at Raul’s house. There'd been something vital in its heat, and I wonder what made her do it, other than drunkenness. What had made her reach out and touch a stranger like he was an old friend, when she will not even call him by his first name? I wonder if I can find her in my dreams,...

A vision quest is often the best prelude to sleep.

The light behind my eyes steadies now, becomes brighter. I breathe a similar calm, steadying light into my throat, and settle it there. Random patterns swirl, jewels crystallise, then disintegrate. In the patterns I see ripened heads of barley, tight clusters of the grain and the sweep of whiskers - a whole meadow moving slowly, long waves sweeping. These are the images, Lewis, that lure us in. The trick is to hold onto them, to develop them, and suddenly,...

There's a woman seated in a circle of flattened barley. She's a flower child - sixties smock, a band around her forehead, long hair - black, shiny. Not Rebecca. Not my beautiful vicar.

She's lost her way. Either that or all her friends have grown up

now and drive BMW's, while she alone holds to the dreams of her youth, a dream of integrity, of freedom, of dignity in poverty, and all that.

Perhaps she is me. Don't laugh. I have been a woman many times in the dreaming.

I expect she'll melt, but for now she's steadying, taking on more detail. There are flowers and sequins in the patterned hem of her dress. The nails of her fingers and toes are painted a dark brown - long fingers, long toes, and they wave like the heads of barley, stroking the wind. She looks up, dark mascara lending her eyes a startled look.

I feel the heaviness of sleep approaching, and teeter on the edge of unconsciousness - such a fine balance, this opening the door to sleep without losing consciousness inside of it. I breathe more into the light, and the scene sharpens, becomes numinous, feeding on the energy of the evening, taking on greater levels of sensation and detail. I hear the rustle of the barley, smell the sweetness of the meadow , feel the heat on my neck.

Just,.. one,... more,.. breath,... and,...

I'm in.

All of this is real, Lewis. You have to understand that, or at least accept it as a possibility, or we can go no further with this story, my friend. And that would be a pity for there is much to tell. I am fully conscious, and awake inside of my dream. Reject that possibility and nothing else I'm going to say will make any sense at all.

"Have you a message for me?" I ask.

"You'll be asleep soon," she says.

What she means is it would be a waste of time conveying anything of importance while I'm so weary.

"But have you a message?"

"Asleep soon."

One must remain alert and respectful in this realm. Alert for the symbols and the allegory, for these things are the language of the dreaming, and we must be respectful of the denizens we find here. I give myself over to the feel of things and sit beside her. I'd thought I'd made a good transition, but one can never tell, and I know I need to improve my techniques - that I'm too relaxed, too careless at times, that the great dream masters have spent their whole lives cultivating this art, yet I expect to make way with so little discipline.

She offers me her lap and I offer her mine. Thus, we curl together into Yin and Yang, and I explore this inner world from the comfort of it. The scents, the sounds, the taste of the air - all are sense impressions, and therefore at their root, in this place, imaginary. I feel the shadow of sleep again, a darkness settling over my shoulder. I let it gather a while, then struggle as if against the coming of death, afraid of being consumed, of falling unconscious. She steadies me, a hand upon my arm.

Like Rebecca's

Don't resist, she's saying. Let it be.

Sleep comes, and then a deeper dream, unbidden. It has a dream's half-light and a beguiling air to which I succumb, forgetting my self. Thus I become one with the dream, rather than one *in* the dream. This is the difference between lucid and non-lucid dreaming, Lewis. I only hope I am disciplined enough to remember it afterwards. Lucid dreaming needs no such effort of course. Lucid dreaming is unforgettable.

Ah,... here she is now. You see?

Rebecca!

She is walking through the grounds of St Oswald's church, Grasmere. She's looking for William Wordsworth. I tell her the poet is dead, that I thought she knew. She doesn't believe me and demands to see his grave. So I show her to the grave and comment that she has no stick and seems to be walking perfectly well without it. She tells me Wordsworth borrowed her stick and what else can she do? He is an important man, while she is nothing.

There are many graves with Wordsworth's name, and she demands I tell her which one is true. I try to work it out from the dates, but cannot remember when he died. I should know this of course because I teach English, but like Orwell, Wordsworth is no longer on the curriculum, and the dream has made me forgetful of all I ever knew about him.

It starts to rain and Rebecca's hair is getting wet. I put up an umbrella and tell her we can share it since we're friends, and if she calls me Timothy. She says: "Goodbye, Mr. Magowan," and walks away into the downpour. I note she's limping again, leaning heavily on a stick, having apparently found it in my presence.

The dream fades.

Hmm,..

I wake to the sound of rain, and reach for the 'Droid, so I can tap

it all down, then launch it into the clouds for your perusal. You think me mad by now? Well, that's your problem; no one asked you to take an interest, but since you're here I shall make use of you in some way that's not yet clear to me.

Ah,... it's ages since I was in Grasmere, and it's not far from the cabin, in the heart of the Lakes, so I take the hint and resolve to visit, to do the tourist thing. I shall also add Wordsworth's collected poems to my box of books before I leave, just in case. I have long believed there to be a line among his works that grants instant enlightenment - it's just a question of reading it at the right time, under the right circumstances.

The alarm goes off.

I check for texts and messages, wondering if I might have one from Rebecca, but there are none. And how can there be any when she doesn't know my number? Well, I have a fancy of her lifting it from my phone, yesterday, before she returned it to me. And why would she do that? Because she's in love with me, why else?

Wait.

Think this through will you?

You only ever imagine a woman is in love with you when you are beginning to project a part of yourself onto her, and such a thing is usually the way a man becomes attached to a woman - not the other way around. Indeed at your age, Timothy 'the other way around' is most unlikely.

But I left my soul in love many years ago with Miranda. And the way to rescue that part of myself is not to go falling in love again. How can I when I am no longer whole? Indeed I feel so thinly stretched these days, there can be very little of me left to give. And Rebecca does not love me. That's just the part of me that clings to romance and happy endings.

What am I thinking then?

What is it about this woman that interests me of a sudden?

Is it like I said: am I thinking I can mend her?

But you know how that story goes: the broken ones must *want* mending, and in truth most do not, which is why they always end up broken again. They cling to pain. It is a part of who they are. Those who genuinely want mending must seek *you* out, not the other way around, or you cannot help them - like Raul, and his infected eye. But that wasn't me. That was him insisting he saw something in me that was not there. And it was through his own

misguided belief in me that Raul was empowered to cure himself.

So let Rebecca believe in you the same way.

The trouble is I think she already does, Lewis. She believes in a part of me I have yet to believe in myself. Is it conceivable I've just been sent a message from the dreaming? That if I visit Wordsworth in Grasmere, I'll find Rebecca waiting in Saint Oswald's Church Yard? You see how those who live by their dreams live dangerously? You would never think of believing in such a thing. Nor would I, except lately I'm more drawn towards such thinking. Yet to live this way all the time would surely be too much.

You see my dilemma, Lewis?

I should fear it, anyone's belief in me. And I do, because it risks highlighting the hollowness of the man who has become Timothy Magowan.

I rise, pee out my aching bladder, then shuffle into the back garden for Qigong, warming gradually to Tai Chi, then Kung Fu. These are Chinese mind-body exercises, Lewis. There is no equivalent system in the west. Then I shower, and breakfast while scrolling through the BBC on the 'Droid: war, sexual perversion, torture, corruption in high places, terror-bogeymen and economic collapse.

Same as it's always been.

Chapter 8

We are entirely divorced from our neolithic culture, the culture that listened to its dreams - replaced it gradually with a culture of rules, and lies, so we lose ourselves in delusion. That is the nature of the West, the collective western psyche. It presents us with disjointed images of nightmare, renders us naked and despairing before it, like the portrait of the unknown woman in Raul's back room. And we fear our nakedness, fear exposing our weaknesses, our scars, like Rebecca, and like me, because in a culture that reveres the Godlike, those of us with imperfections can never go unpunished. The imperfect is everywhere and always the need for someone to blame. God forbid I should ever seriously lose my footing and the finger of blame should point at me!

Clearly we need new gods, new stories, Lewis, But who shall write them?

Those cultures who retain their dreaming, and from whom we might rediscover our own past - the Navajo, the Aborigine, the Tibetan - how strange they are to us, their symbols sitting uneasily in the psyche. We need our own stories, our own myths to hold to, and must start from scratch again or dig back into our mythic past. No point my dreaming of flying on an eagle's back, when eagles maintain such a tenuous hold upon our lands now. Better for us a raven, or an owl, or a crow. And on the ground what better ally than a fox? Or a badger, or the tiny darting shrew?

Is that my power animal, then? The darting shrew? The timid field mouse? It certainly felt that way as I cowered behind Raul in Strickland's meeting that morning. But what choice have we? Where are the noble lions, the bears the wolves? We have shot them all into extinction, eliminated them from our concept of reality.

I observe the lesser creatures from the cabin, this first weekend of freedom, recline in the warmth of a sun magnified through triple glazing and I gaze down upon the clearing where all of nature falls under my detached gaze. There are grebe out on the water, red ruffs of glory flashing. I watch through binoculars as they dive, and make a game of guessing where they'll rise. I'm clumsy at first, my head contaminated with the refuse of a long term, and the nonsense of Strickland's five E's. But eventually, yes,... eventually, Lewis, I start to tune back in.

Thus, slowly, I wind down, and wait for the real dreams to come. I don't move, not even to eat, and I slip in and out of reality for a full circle of the sun until I feel fit to re-enter the world again. But it's a world you are not familiar with. Have you the nerve for it, I wonder? Let me remind you it is you who chooses to snoop on me. I would sooner keep these things to myself.

At dawn on the Sunday, I chop wood for cooking, working up a sweat in the steam heat of that first August morning, then I swim naked in the tarn. I'm a mile of steep, bone-shaking lane from any public way here, several miles from anyone and anything - safe enough to dispense with the usual modesties. The cabin is remote and disconnected, like me. There are no human eyes to mind my scars here, nor the ugliness of an un-young body when it bathes in the tarn.

I check the waterwheel I installed last year. It generates electricity, which, along with power generated from the photovoltaics on the roof, I store in submarine batteries. For all its ostentation, the system will not power anything more than a few lightbulbs, a laptop, and a fridge freezer. I expect the beck will wash the wheel away now and then, when it's in spate. No matter - it will give me something to do fixing it up again.

The sewer system is an older contraption involving septic tanks and pumps and reed beds - quite modern in its thinking at the time, and eliminates the need for sewer drains. Water is pumped fresh from a well, also piped from the beck, and filtered through a system I invented involving activated charcoal, though I'm told by locals the water at this altitude is as pure as anything that comes from the utility company's reservoirs.

I am self contained here. No utility bills, and the minimum council tax, which I still resent having to pay, drawing as I do upon the council for so little. I suppose I generate refuse like anyone else, but my bins are a mile away, at the end of that bone shaking lane. The refuse travels in sacks in the back of the Volvo for deposit, whenever I am passing. What else do I get for my council tax? Library membership? The protection of the tazer boys? I've not used a library in years, can't get in them nowadays for people checking their Facebook profiles, and all I've got to thank the tazer boys for are the six skull and crossed-bones currently besmirching my driving license.

Lapses of concentration are now indictable offences.

Make a note of my displeasure, Lewis.

No, Timothy - one speeding offence might be excused as a lapse in concentration. Two in the same spot is more a warning that you need to wake up!

The cabin is a split level "A" frame arrangement, imported from Norway in the seventies. It's capable of both generating and retaining heat north of the Arctic circle. The wood I burn for cooking is expensive, if I am forced to buy it, but there are plenty of windfalls to be had hereabouts, and no one to say I can't have them. It sits in several acres of woodland, half way up a nameless fell, and it overlooks a small mountain tarn to which I have access.

Idyllic.

Perfect.

And paradoxically worthless at the same time.

All of this is my aunt's dream, not mine, though the best dreams are sometimes worth inheriting if you’re struggling to nurture your own. You're wondering why I don't live here permanently? How easy to plunge fully into the well of myself? I could do it, Lewis, but only lack the courage - like I said, I'm not sure it's a place either of us should go just yet because the dreams here are so deep and I lack confidence in swimming them.

All right, what now that we have settled in a little? An outing perhaps? We should try Grasmere first. There'll be enough strangeness there if past experience is anything to go by. I hesitate though, because if Rebecca should indeed be waiting, I shall be at a loss for an explanation. You might also be forgiven for thinking my story contains more fancy than truth. But such are myths, Lewis.

Shall we go and see what happens?

Chapter 9

Grasmere. Picture postcard Grasmere. Just a thirty minute drive, yet a world away from the Lake District I know - the sublime beauty of the Wordsworths and Coleridge, and Southey. No, *not* Grasmere, Lewis. The poets would not recognise themselves there any more.

In truth, I dislike the place immensely now, dislike the moneyed incomers, and the locals equally, having found them universally unfriendly, and paradoxically at war with us, the day-tourists who provide their living. Never been to Grasmere? Beware, the carparks have installed credit-card readers now, because no one carries that much loose change any more - another reason we must earn a living - so we can park our cars! Your secret camera reads our number plate as we drive on, and sends the fine directly if we drive off again without paying what we owe.

It's true, Lewis. You really *do* know where we live?

However, I possess something you do not - a little local knowledge - and there's a long lay-by out on the main road up to King Dunmail's rise. I'm early enough to squeeze the Volvo in for free. What was it Rebecca said? Nowadays all we have to go by are our wits? And small victories, in the face of overwhelming odds, mean a lot.

It's begun to rain. Golfing-brolly aloft, I walk the mile back into the village. Woodsmoke forms a cap upon the vale, the leaden clouds a higher cap, cutting off the fells at a few hundred feet. The air is cool, a Lakeland summer maturing. I buy gingerbread, then repair to the churchyard to pay my respects. This is the tourist thing, you understand.

Now, just a moment, let me see:

Wordsworth, William; 1770-1850. Mary (wife), and Dorothy (sister), muses in their different ways. And Sara, third muse, Mary's sister – beloved of STC. His children are here too, also Hartley, son of Coleridge. Old stories, Lewis, his best work done in his twenties, an age I can barely remember now, then a long life of contemplation, and one tragedy after another. For such is life.

Is that where I am now?

Surely I am worth one last flourish!

American tourists are photographing shyly, as if they fear it might be a sin, or there's a charge, because for everything else here,

save the air we breathe, there is either a charge or a notice to forbid it. I intuit they've already been told off for pointing their cameras in the hallowed halls of the Wordswortharium. They see me looking, so I smile to separate myself from the shadow of sour-faced officialdom. The wide old gentleman, and his blonded dame sidle over, ask if I will photograph them together, church in the background, then ask the way to Rydal Mount. I'm glad to oblige. I never fail to be charmed by the graciousness of Americans when in England, and wonder how they can be so genteel, yet carry guns at home in case of arguments. I offer them a nibble of my gingerbread, and they accept.

It seems at least I have a face that people trust.

Story of my life, Lewis.

Myths, remember? Half truths. Imaginings.

But can I be trusted with the telephone in my pocket? Might I not be tempted to take photographs of Janice Iddon's armpits? Ughh! There is a risk of course I might indeed be tempted - more-so now the thought is planted in my head, and the possibility of my perversion implied by an official risk assessment.

Why am I thinking about this now?

Poor Janice – it's a thing I'm sure she will grow out of. The sweaty armpits, I mean.

I recall I used to have a penchant for the soft porn gleanings of the Internet. You probably already know this. If not, then shame on you. What kind of snooper are you? Dig deeper man! I'm old enough of course to have outgrown any embarrassment I might once have felt in admitting such a thing. Girls on girls are/were my particular fetish. Fetish too of Coleridge if his poem Christabel is anything to judge by.

It's a very practical thing of course, the male fascination for the sapphic - containing double the female allure, and without the sight of a man's hairy arse pumping up and down, which - let the record show, and without wishing to be labelled homophobic of course - never did much for me.

An hour passes in St Oswald's Church yard, and I begin to feel shifty, that I might be stealing something I should be paying for. Why am I still here? Can I really be waiting for Rebecca?

It seems I am.

I'm reminded there are conflicting stories about the Wordsworths, a dozen different pictures, all based upon sober

research - that they were not the homely saints of chocolate box fame. That Dorothy was an ugly, toothless crone by her middle age, and a sycophant to Coleridge's mediocre genius, that she encouraged him in his infatuation for Sara Hutchinson, to the detriment of his married life, and then there's always the old chestnut that Dorothy and William shared a cosy bed from time to time!

But at this distance, they can only be what each of us imagine them to be. Take me for example; what do you know of me, Lewis? I confess, I am just an old English teacher. I read the poetry these people wrote, and find I like it. Only those who believe poetry comes solely from the mouths of men think the poet's proclivities important enough to scrutinise and demonise, as if any of it mattered a damn.

The muses do not care so long as we can sing for them.

Well, Rebecca's a no-show. Hardly a surprise, you're thinking, yet I'm thinking there had been a certain *something* in that vision.

Do I feel a little stupid?

Of course I do.

I also feel a peculiar vibration in my heart - fear it might be the beginnings of heart disease or, failing that, hunger, or a desire for strong coffee, when coffee here will cost five pounds per dainty cup. Oh shut up, Tim. Listen - it's your 'phone buzzing, the pattern of it telling you your texts and emails have caught up with you.

It's a dead-zone at the cabin, remember?

Okay.

You already know this, Lewis, but for the benefit of anyone else I have a text from Raul, saying Rebecca wanted my phone number, followed by an emoticon of surprise and lots of exclamation marks. Sigh! I have to remind myself we are middle aged men and not teenage boys. Then I have a text from Rebecca, asking if the Albion hotel on Windermere is far from my wooden hut.

Albion. Ancient isle, beyond the bounds of Gaul. Rich in minerals and slaves - or at least it was thus I presume the Corporate types of the Roman empire justified its expansion north, into the rain and wind and darkness of the said mucky mire of Albion.

Myth.

The myth of Albion.

The myth of Rebecca Rayworth. Rita Hayworth.

Stop it Timothy, you are dissolving into nonsense.

And why text? Shy to ring? To disturb my peace? She disturbed me enough the night we talked at Raul's house.

Think, man. What are you saying?

I text back that it's not far. And would she like to meet? Then I press send and retreat at once to the dead-zone on my nameless fell before she can reply, take shelter in my disconnected cabin, close the door, ignore the ripening of summer, and I sleep some more.

I went to Grasmere to find her, and having found her now fight shy. But when dreams deliver that way, you're not going to ignore them for very long, Lewis. You can trust me on this, they simply won't let you.

Chapter 10

In the dream of the shaman, the initiate is captured, taken deep into the earth, to a chamber of horrors, and there dismembered. He embraces unconsciousness at the first deep cut, welcomes death, but death does not come. Instead, he wakens and, looking about the chamber, he sees the parts of himself, lifeless lumps of meat, dripping blood and gore, like at the slaughterhouse. And there he waits in horror, for it seems he cannot die.

But the end is a new beginning as benign beings piece him back together, and make him more than whole when they add the gift of the inner sight, and gift him also the drum upon whose beat he rides the pathless paths, and enters in the gateless gates of the nether realm - or in my case an iPod with a Binaural beats App. Then he returns to life with the mark upon him, and all who see that mark know him for what has become.

Except in my case, they don't.

Only Raul and Rebecca think they see something in me.

Wait,... where am I now?

Shit!

I'm in a pub, in a London side street. Black brick and rain, and Raul is downing a pint of mediocre ale. Amelia Grey is seated, predictably naked, in a booth behind him, playing dominoes with Strickland, who has one hand permanently glued to her breast. This irritates me and I want to remonstrate with him, but feel inhibited by his imagined riposte - that I'm only jealous and would sooner it was my own hand glued there instead of his - which is quite possibly true.

Meanwhile Raul is telling me we should have another pint of this bland brew, but drink more deeply this time to see if we can discern its taste, that it's not blandness it suffers from, but rather an excess of subtlety. I look across the bar and my heart lights up at the sight of my beautiful vicar. She's seated, reading an old book, like a journal, like Strickland's stuffed diary - odd bits of paper hanging out of it. She lifts the cover a fraction so I can see it embossed with the initials RBR. Such things are of particular significance in dreams, I find, so I make a mental note to try and remember it. *RBR?* She raises a glass of wine to me, clear and cold, and sweet and wholesome,...

The cabin is dark when I wake, just a faint cherry glow from the burner. My mouth is dry and I need the loo, but my legs have gone to sleep, so I'll have to wait a bit.

It's 4 am, and I'm squashed uncomfortably on the leather sofa. My 'Droid lights up the darkness strangely - bright enough to hurt my eyes but not enough to clear the shadows. I tap the details in. RBR, was it? Why RBR? RR, yes, I could understand that as representing Rebecca Raworth, but what of the B? No, I'm getting this all wrong.

I queue my words for delivery to the cloud, so the 'Droid can dispatch them next time we're in range of a tower, then you, my dear Lewis, can further ponder the meaning of Timothy Magowan, God help you. Perhaps when we meet in the next life, you can explain him to me.

And then,...

Dawn breaks, sluggish, dim. There's mist, like ghost horses, descending the fell, slow fingers curling through the denseness of the forest. I watch through the triple glazing as the light thickens, then rain begins to streak the glass and break the morning stillness of the tarn with overlapping rings of silver. Thus the day settles in wet and rather cold for August. It's a good day for contemplation, for reading, for meditation, for lingering in my dead-zone, if only to avoid replies from Rebecca. My reluctance is puzzling. I like her, would like to talk to her, to sit with her, to smell her.

Why am I afraid of this?

My ambivalence is infuriating.

Could it be that I'm afraid of what she might want from me?

I'm more rested this morning, you see, more rational, and am able to contemplate more sensibly what it is she might be after. I'm not flattering myself that this means something; I am nearly fifty years old, and not once in my life has a woman ever made romantic overtures, or dared to flirt - something about me - either unattractive, or too serious, I don't know, so whatever it is she wants, we can rest assured it is not my heart, nor less my body; she does not seek that kind of completion in me, so I shall not be making the mistake of seeking it in her.

But the fact remains: she does want *something*.

I am too old for love, especially the loving of one so experienced and broken and as plainly self-aware as Rebecca Rayworth. It seems an overly problematic scenario, and useless. When faced with a

conundrum, it's always better to seek the simpler path, and when still in doubt, to hide one's head in the sand.

I decide on Penrith for supplies, and lunch, and musty books.

Supplies? Coffee and cold meats from the Cooperative store. Some tins of this and that. And bread. I pause in the booze aisle out of habit still, then remember the threat of anosmia, and chest infections, and ughh,... *nasal polyps*, and I move on. It took a while to break myself out of the desire to dull the edges of the world with alcohol, better to smell it in all it's glory, Lewis.

Even one's farts.

Then it's lunch in the secret court-yard garden of a familiar little café, where I sit under an overly optimistic summer parasol, in spite of the rain. The waitress dodges drips from the awnings to bring me a toasted sandwich. She shivers a little in her thin cardigan, but smiles indulgently. I prefer Penrith to Grasmere. It is not a chocolate box fantasy got up to mesmerise and fleece the pockets of child-like tourists. It is what it is, an old town, roaring and even once boasting a Woolworths until the fat cats broke the world. Yet the Wordsworths lived here too; their history lies in part along its streets and alleyways. But myths are curiously selective in their rememberings, are they not?

Tourists on the trail of potted culture do not stop me to ask the way to Penrith.

The Droid is on the table, switched off, while I eat. I tell myself I'm saving the battery, then tell myself I should switch it on for a moment and see if Rebecca has texted me, then tell myself I don't want to know, in case she suggests a meeting - even though I hinted at one - and I don't want to see her because I'm no good with women. Or is it that I fear whatever it is she wants from me I'll be incapable of delivering, or more specifically that I will be incapable of healing her if she asks it.

Woa!

That's new Timothy.

Whatever made you think of that?

I will fail her. I will neglect her, like I neglected Miranda.

Like I failed Miranda.

Now this run of thought is really interesting; a part of me would heal her if I could, but I fear to fail?

The 'Droid beckons and my fingers itch for it.

No. Let this fester a bit longer, Tim. It needs to mature before you

can properly make out the shape of it.

The news then?

No. It'll just be the same as it's always been.

To be sure, I'm weary of the news, Lewis, and it's such a pleasure to avoid it at the cabin; no phone, no broadband, and no T.V. Besides, there's such a transience to events these days there's no sense in subjecting oneself to them when even a weekend can see them over and done and swept away, before I'm even aware of them. And anyway there is always such a sameness to the story, I wonder if I'm making it up.

The 'Droid remains switched off.

Lunch complete, I repair to Whittaker's, the antiquarian book dealer.

Penrith - red sandstone, softening in the corners, the dust and roar of modern construction, and rain. Whittaker's hides in a narrow, darkened cobbled side-street. Three floors of weathered sandstone. Its front window is decorated with new titles at eye-watering pre-knock-down prices. But who will buy them, when I can finger my 'Droid and have them delivered directly to it, at half the price?

There has been a bookshop here for two hundred years. I wonder if the Wordsworths knew it, if the fingers of a young, precocious Dorothy ever roamed its shelves. The place has the feel of the pub from last night's dream - dark wood, shadowy, pregnant with a hidden meaning. I enter already prepared for strangeness.

Second hand and antiquarian books line the corridors of the upper floors. Dim, intimate, silent, book-scented. Such a thing as this cannot be delivered any other way of course. It has to be *experienced.* For sure the online world, for all its words, lacks sensuality, Lewis. It lacks a sense of smell!

John Whittaker (junior) mans the till. He looks up like he's seen no one in weeks. I try to avoid his eye, discover I am not in the mood for conversation today, but he insists, and I am too polite to avoid him.

"Mr. Magowan?"

He knows my name? How come I am not aware of this? It happens a lot, Lewis - people taking more notice of me than I do of them.

"Yes, good morning, Mr. Whittaker. How's business?"

"You've not heard?" He looks tired, jaded, unshaven. "I'm

closing," he says. "End of the month. Retiring."

I'm shocked by this, though it's unclear why. "Ah,... end of an era, then,..." My words sound lame and do little justice to my feelings. I sense my muse look up, look sharp at this news and poke me into attention. She sometimes wears the garb of a young Dorothy - the Goddess in her second aspect.

"Yes," he says. He dons a braver face. "Coffee?"

I've been visiting Whittakers for twenty years but still, it surprises me he knows my name. It surprises me even more he should want to be friendly with me now at this apparently late stage of the game. Yes, yes, I've already said it's my fault - this assumption of invisibility - and I really should make the effort to engage with others more. But he *never* serves coffee to customers. He must want something from me then, like Rebecca. But, like her, what? What is it about me that makes people think I have energy to spare, enough to fill their own void?

What about me? What about what I want! Who fills my void?

You have your dreams, Timothy.

"That's very kind, Mr Whittaker, thank you."

I find myself in a side room with John Whittaker; we are seated in deep buttoned Chesterfields, either side of a snugly crackling coal fire. This is a pleasant turn-up, and I might even enjoy encouraging our new found intimacy, except it sounds as if he'll be gone by the time I visit Penrith again. He has wild grey hair, is sixty years old or thereabouts, grey jacket, grey cardigan with tobacco burns from his pipe. He lights his pipe now and settles back. Beside him, on the floor are neat little piles of old books, cloth bound, some busted, some gleaming darkly in oiled leather.

I'm alert, wondering at the meaning of this, wondering if I'm still dreaming, and how would I know the difference?

"So,..." he says, as we settle back with coffee. "What about this asteroid then?"

I'm puzzled. "Asteroid?"

He points to a copy of the Daily Mail on the table. Armageddon has moved to the front page. "Asteroid to Strike Earth?" Note the question mark. The answer is no, of course it won't strike the earth - the notion is preposterous, but headlines are notoriously emotive teasers, creators of a roller coaster reality that is neither true nor false. When it misses the headline will be "Earth spared annihilation" - except *annihilation* is too heavy on the syllables for a

commercial print headline.

Still, this is new. I've not caught the news for a few days. It was only a meteorite before - not sensational enough I suppose. Asteroid sounds so much more substantial! I catch the words "Scientists say,..." then sit back, unimpressed. Scientists say all sorts of things, and most of them garbage. It's odd, I think, how we have always courted Armageddon. Asteroids pass us by all the time. It's only on slow news days they threaten to strike. What is it that makes us thrill to the thought of annihilation, Lewis? Have we, like Freud suggests, such a burning instinct for death?

Whittaker shrugs. "Maybe I should have retired years ago. If this thing hits I'm told it'll wipe out all life as we know it."

I smile, wonder if he's seriously worried or merely feeling out the way to begin conversing with me. I decide to help him out a little, offer him another thread, less fantastical. "Will you be passing the business on, Mr Whittaker?"

He shakes his head, still distracted by the front page. "I doubt anyone will want it. It'll stand empty for a bit, then probably be converted as residential flats."

"Your stock?"

"Already sold most of the collectables. There are still a few dealers interested in that sort of thing, but generally it's not a good time for bookshops, or indeed any kind of small shop, particularly one stuck up an obscure side-street like ours."

"It's a pity. There's been a bookshop here for,... a very long time"

"The world changes, Mr Magowan. Books no longer mean what they used to mean."

"And your father? How's he going on? He'll be disappointed, I'm sure."

Mr Whittaker senior is in his nineties, sold me a copy of Wordsworth's collected poems only a few weeks ago. Cloth bound, 1868 edition, gilt edges. It cost only a few pounds, but he handled it like it was the holy grail.

"He's doing well. Fishing today. And actually, no, it was his advice we cut our losses. We have enough savings to get by. Our needs are simple. My father's idea of heaven is a day by the lake with his rods. And mine's not much different."

I'm hoping I shall be as active, as vital, and as interested in life when I am eighty - dare not hope to live into my nineties. I wonder if by then I'll be any wiser than I am now. Then I wonder if it's

worth living to such a ripe old age, or if it's better to slip away into one's dreams much sooner, or even have an asteroid fall from the heavens and be done with it. Perhaps if I had children of my own I'd feel more of an incentive to stick around.

"It's the young ones I feel sorry for," he says, connecting with my thoughts. "At least we knew a brief period of optimism and expansion. But this constant declinism is a terrible grind for the soul."

"Indeed it is, Mr Whittaker."

He sighs. "You know, I was in Manchester the other week and found a place actually giving books away."

"Really? Giving them away?"

"So I asked the bloke: I said, why are you giving them away? Why not charge at least a few pence for them? And he says they would have gone for pulp, except if you put them in an otherwise empty shop, it means the owner doesn't pay as much rent, or something like that. It was a sort of trick."

"Really? And,... were people,... browsing?"

"No. Unless its chick-lit, you can't even given books away these days. Women have always been better readers than men."

"I've noticed that. Or is it just that no one writes books for men, because publishers have decided only women read books, so men are denied the opportunity, and accused by feminists of being morons at the same time."

He laughs, gathers his thoughts, clears his throat. I feel we're about to get to the nub of the matter. "So,... anyway,... I'm sorry we've not spoken at length before. I know you come in the shop regularly. You've been a good customer over the years."

"I spend most weekends and school holidays in the Lakes, these days. I'm a teacher. I'm considering moving up here permanently, actually." *Am I? This is news to me.* "I shall miss the shop," I tell him, and it's true, I shall. "Places like this are few and far between now. And what you sell here you can't get online."

"I would have said it was exactly online shopping that was my problem, Mr. Magowan."

"I'm sure it is, mainly. But book lovers are romantics, too, Mr. Whittaker. We're looking always for a fated encounter. Unfortunately, our leisurely browsing for dusty old books worth only a few pounds doesn't generate much of an income for you."

"True. You can do that online though, surely - invite a fated

encounter. Don't they call it surfing or something?"

"Not the same as browsing an old bookshop."

He lounges back in his chair, sucks thoughtfully on his pipe and blows a cloud of aromatic smoke. I watch as a glowing ember of tobacco descends and burns another hole in his jumper. He pays it no attention. "Forgive me for saying, but I remember you because you buy a lot of unusual titles from me."

"Unusual?" I smile at that, partly in defence. "You have a good second hand psychology section. It interests me."

"Last time you bought a book on Tibetan Dream Yoga."

Ah! Shamanism. Another test coming up? I have told the Universe, and myself many times, as I am telling you *again* Lewis: I have no pretensions to shamanism. I am what I am, *and what I am, none cares or knows.*

Thank you, John.(Clare)

I nod, warily. "I have a few copies of that particular title."

Whittaker scratches his stubble. "I just wondered,.."

"Oh?"

"What you thought about that sort of thing?"

"Dreams, you mean?"

"To be precise, if I go somewhere in a dream, Mr. Magowan. Is it a real place, or do I just make it up?"

How much of this is idle conversation? Does he truly seek information? Reassurance? Is he experiencing bad dreams? How much is he willing to accept? How much will he reject?

"You mean is it an objective realm, like this one, Mr. Whittaker? Does it endure? Does it have a geography?"

"Yes,... I mean, is it not all just,.... imagination?"

"Well, in a sense everything is imagination."

Ah. You see that, Lewis? He's about to dismiss the notion with a shrug, or perhaps he doesn't understand it - not an easy concept to grasp, I'll grant you. I might let our conversation dwindle there, take up another less contentious thread, but he's sought this in me, so I shall give him both barrels. I doubt he's up to it. Few people are.

"The fundamental property of the Universe is consciousness," I tell him. "We are all fragments of the great dream of the Universe, we are mental phenomena. But since we're inside the dream and have no concept of anything beyond it, we have no choice but to accept it as real, and to abide by its rules, though they are entirely

rules we create for ourselves, and can be broken if we achieve a sufficient level of consensus."

"So you're saying 'yes'. The dream world is a real place. But it's such a chaotic place too, Mr. Magowan - I mean we can break all the rules there."

"Yes. Breaking the rules is possible, even to be encouraged, but we must also be careful, because once we do that, anything becomes possible and we lose ourselves in the dream. So we must approach these things with discipline if we want to make way."

I'm being too clever here. There is something specific in John Whittaker's eyes, something that perplexes him. "I dream some nights I'm here at the shop," he says. "It's closing time. I lock up, I walk home. My wife is waiting. She's made our evening meal. We eat, we talk, we drive out to the Eden valley, or sometimes to a little pub we know. We walk, enjoy the summer sunshine,..."

I'm not sure where he's going with this.

"My wife is dead," he says.

"Ah!"

"Is she trying to tell me something? Is it my wife communicating from,... " he lowers his voice,.. "the other side?"

"Tell me, when you dream, Mr Whittaker, are you *aware* you're dreaming?"

"The first time it happened, no. In the dream, I'd forgotten she was dead, you see? I accepted it all as perfectly normal and real."

"Then, I can only imagine your distress on waking."

"Well,... yes. It was very distressing."

"And your subsequent dreams?"

"I've become aware of dreaming, yes. It's like waking up inside the dream. It sounds unlikely I know, but,..."

"What you describe is perfectly normal, Mr. Whittaker. Lucid dreaming is cultivated as an art by many. You are fortunate. Others have to work very hard to achieve that state."

"My wife doesn't seem to know she's dead, Mr. Magowan. She goes on in the dream as we did before. It doesn't seem right. I want to tell her she's dead. It seems only proper that she knows. Should I tell her, do you think?"

Ah, tricky!

"She probably wouldn't understand, Mr. Whittaker."

He nods, sighs, turns up the newspaper again, strokes the headline with his fingertips, fishes for a change of subject while he

gathers himself. "Remember the cold war?" he says. "Remember every day the possibility of a nuclear holocaust? We lived with that, didn't we? Remember all that stupid advice about digging shelters in your back garden to protect against blast and radiation?"

"I remember."

"We would have been better sitting right under the first bomb when it went off. Surviving a thing like that would have been unthinkable. The dead would have been the lucky ones."

"I agree."

"Is it my wife, Mr. Magowan?"

I realise this is not the time for didactics, nor less the finer points of eastern existentialism, nor western Hermeticism, nor alchemical theory - that from the ultimate perspective, there can be no death, because there has never been anyone to die. Such theorising provides little comfort in the face of death.

What happens when we die, Lewis?

Nothing?

"I don't know," I tell him. "I've met entities in dreams of course. Some of them I appear to know, some I don't. I'm never sure what to make of them, whether they're who they appear to be, or just figments of my own mind. But I've learned we must always be respectful of appearances, respectful of *them*, respectful of the dream architect. The dreaming is a reality we're not fully equipped to comprehend, you see? It contains insights to be carried through into our waking life, but beyond that we must respect the mystery, be respectful of its infinite depth and subtlety."

He nods, though I am not helping him with his question. He must miss her terribly. Is he hoping to be sitting under this asteroid? Is he actively wishing it on our heads? Is he thinking it would be very pleasant to exist in the dream state, with his wife, the pair of them doing the things they have enjoyed together in the past? Does he seek reassurance of such a life after death, from me?

Strange priest am I.

"We must treat them as they appear to be, Mr. Whittaker, while remaining mindful of our ignorance regarding the full nature of identity." It might not be his wife as he knew her, I'm telling him, but the encounter is still meaningful if he can accept the possibility of it.

He seems to take some comfort from this.

We talk a little more about dreams. He's open to the idea of the

objective, though infinitely malleable reality of the dreamscape - older people usually are. It's the young, still contaminated with the details of their education, still impaled squarely on the spike of their own egos, who reject it. I suspect you're young, Lewis, so my advice is to forget all of this. Your place is still within the narrow, shady streets of the real world. You'll learn nothing from me, as I interest myself so little in the affairs of your world these days.

The best I can do for Whittaker is reassure him it's all right to dream as he does. It's all I can ever sensibly do - reconnect people with their dreams, rather than lead them into the dream world where our mutual inexperience and timidity can only bring trouble. Such is the nature of my sedition, Lewis. I teach escape, expansion of consciousness, transcendence, and my weapon is the dream. Except I do not teach it, except to those who ask.

Which, up to, now is no one.

So,...

I forget what I came into the shop for, realise I had no specific purpose, and eventually take my leave in the late afternoon, nonplussed by the experience. But as I'm about to step through the door, Whittaker presses a book into my hands - a small, leather bound journal - much creased and frayed.

"Victorian," he says. "I've had it for a while. It's a personal journal - nobody anyone's heard of unfortunately, otherwise it might be quite valuable. But it talks about dreaming, you see, and if anyone can appreciate it, you can. I can barely read the writing. I offered it to a dealer but he didn't want it. I have to clear my stock, and I couldn't bear the thought of just throwing it away."

Ah!

Another intrusion from the subliminal.

At once the book feels precious, if only for its being gifted to me so spontaneously. The cover feels warm, alive with possibility. I open it to the first page and read the inscription: Emma Louise Hollander, 1860. No address. Whittaker is right about the handwriting - small, busy and much faded. But old things interest me, and I am delighted with it. Emma Louise Hollander? HLH, not RBR, another thread to plait into the mystery of my story for you, and have it mean something.

Hmm, challenging!

"Thank you, Mr Whittaker. Can I not give you anything for it?"

"No, it's a gift. But you should call again, before we close for

business."

"I shall. I'm around all summer."

"Let me know if you find the book interesting. And thank you, for the conversation, and the advice."

I shake his hand. "Before you sleep. Clear your mind and breathe. Focus. Tell yourself you want to remember your dreams. Then let it go. And you shall remember them."

There is another possibility regarding Whittaker's wife. It might be that she has come looking for him, come to prepare him for the time when he will join her permanently. Strange - he looked tired, but not ill. I am not a great believer in troubling the dead, nor in venturing far across the Styx before my time. But I'm willing to accept they sometimes come looking for us, that they will venture into the liminal zone of dreams, seeking conversation and even gossip on the state of worldly affairs. I would have thought from their perspective, outside of time, they might have taught us much about the coming times, but my experience of dream entities, if the dead they be, is they are as clueless and lost in the mystery as the rest of us.

It's still raining as I seek the Volvo. The clouds scrape low over the town, giving the feel of a winter's dusk, but there's a lightness to my mood now as there so often is following contact with other human beings - not all, but those with whom I sense a fated connection. I have the journal in the pocket of my overcoat, and slide my hand down to feel once more the aged luxury of the cover. We must be careful of material possessions, Lewis, lest we immediately begin to fear their loss. But it is more than the book; it is the name; I find myself armoured by it, as if it were a charm of words whose speaking casts a spell of protection about me. Or perhaps it's more that I have always known Emma Louise Hollander, and have been waiting since 1860, for us to meet again.

It's a peculiar thought, but not unwelcome.

I shall look her up online. I'm off the grid at the cabin of course, but I have 3G on the 'Droid, and a contract I don't mind burning to the max. There are also cyber cafe's in Glenridding and Keswick now - worth the trip for coffee and cake.

I shall make it my mission to find out who she is.

Notice I did not say who she *was*. Thus Emma is adopted as a manifestation of my muse. A muse is different, you see? Never having lived, they are possessed of greater power than the dead,

greater foresight. A muse is a manifestation of the Gods. But wait, Timothy - that she has written this journal - put pen to paper - how can she not have lived? I know, it's a paradox, but Dorothy is also my muse's occasional guise. We project them, Lewis, and it's a trick I learned long ago, that it's better a man projects his muse upon the dead, than on a woman still living.

There's something powerful about her presence and I feel so armoured by it I even find the courage to switch on the 'Droid. I pull up the Google box and am typing in "Emma + Louise + Hollander,..." when the phone bleeps: Text from Rebecca: "Dinner Tmmrw? 7:30. My treat. Hotel Albion. Tweeds optional. Becca out."

Becca?

I feel a sudden whirring in my stomach, a peculiar thing. It's what? Hard to define, but the word *pleasurable* comes close. Yes, *pleasure*, Lewis, except there's also an element of danger in it. Dinner with Rebecca Rayworth? What strangeness is this? Except,... I rather like the sound of it, so I make back. "My *pleasure*." And the whirring in my stomach becomes a tingling in every nerve of my body, and then a heat in my cheeks.

I am a teenager again.

How lovely!

Back at the car, I settle inside and breathe, click the radio on for company and distraction. At once it recommences its recounting of that repeating story of war, rape, torture, corruption in high places and economic decline. I leave it on, but pay it little attention as I steer the car back across the M6. The rain comes on in earnest and the wipers squeal upon the greasy screen. I head south into the Lakes, to Ullswater. All my life I have dreamed of living among these hills, these soft pastures.

Could it be my time is coming?

Spend the money, Tim.

Your mum and dad would have wanted it for you.

But if that was so why have they not come and told you?

Why do they not appear in dreams, like Whittaker's wife?

The news goes on: the teacher suspected of murder has now been released without charge. The newspapers have hounded him in disbelief at losing their quarry and the poor guy has run to ground like a hunted fox. There's also mention of an asteroid, RBR 1786, in a close pass with the earth, in a few weeks' time. There is no mention of the likelihood of a strike. This is the sober view.

I prefer it.

Scientists say,...

I click it off, and tell myself if it was really going to hit the earth, put an end to all life upon it, they would have to give it a better name than RBR 1786 - something from a dark myth, call it Poseidon, or Demeter, or Strickland.

Damn,... I was determined not to think of that name!

An associative image of my nemesis springs to mind at once, still playing dominoes with Amelia, only this time she's under the table, her lips sealed around his manhood while she sucks him expertly dry. Strickland continues to play, barely noticing her sterling efforts, and instead, while she's otherwise engaged, steals a look at her dominoes.

Ha! Just like him.

I'm coming up the bumpy road to the cabin now, shaking the image clear, and am perplexed to discover it's given me an erection. This is remarkable, I have to say, for its rareness.

The Buddhists tell us that in order to release ourselves from the destructive wheel of Karma, we must find it in us to be spontaneously compassionate to all beings, especially those we don't like. If we can't we find ourselves locked in the same pattern of responses to conditioned thinking. I know this is true. But I'm going to struggle with Strickland, because we all love to hate at least one person in our lives. It grants us a kind of balance, you see?

Wait,... what was the name of that asteroid?

Did they say RBR?

Chapter 11

I'm still working on the cabin, making it into a stable environment. I mean this in the dream sense, which you may find a little confusing. Let me explain: I have woken in it sometimes, gone padding about the place in search of tea and biscuits, only to find it subtly different - a different sofa, a different kind of table. I switch off a light to find it has no effect on the kind of light there is.

Then I realise I'm still dreaming.

I no longer find this shocking and instead accept it as a consequence of the techniques I practice, plus perhaps a certain inborn tendency anyway. It has always made me careful with reality too, careful to check I am not mistaking it for something else.

The dream cabin is important,... important I construct a replica in my mind, one that's as stable as can be, then I will always have somewhere steady to return to when my dreams begin to wobble. Then I can descend the dark path with all the hounds of hell at my shoulder, secure in the knowledge I have only to make another turn and I will be approaching the cabin, its glazed "A" frame rising in the distance, glinting beacon-like in the gloom. Or that I have only to open any door in my dreams and I will be stepping back into a safe, familiar room, a place I can warm my hands by a permanently burning stove, and brew tea.

If in doubt, Lewis, brew tea.

I brew it now, and make dinner.

You may find this talk of dreams irritating, especially if, as I suspect, you're not much of a dreamer yourself. You'll be locked into that old western concept that they be dismissed as nonsense, as somehow unreal, and entirely unconnected with the more basic business of living. Why then persist with your interest in me? Since I cannot bore you into submission, I am left to assume the only thing that intrigues you is the question: will Rebecca Rayworth and I ever have sex?

In truth, I cannot tell you this my friend because, as you've noticed, I'm writing in the present tense, as I go along, so to speak. All I can say is that it is not my over-riding desire to have sex with anyone at this point in my narrative, nor indeed my life - my libido is far too feeble and erratic to harbour such ambitions as that these

days.

Nor do I complain of it.

What Rebecca wants from me is another matter of course, and we shall have to see about that, because dinner tomorrow night is not just about *dinner*. As I think I said earlier - quick search back through my text: yes indeed I *did* say it - I have never been invited to dinner or anything else for that matter, by a woman. And women always want something. Fair enough, we always want something from them too, but that's simpler and not always possible, and I certainly don't want it from Rebecca.

Why not, you ask?

Is it because of her bad leg?

Don't be so crass. Between you and me Lewis, I'm afraid of her. She looks at me, at the useless blather of my life, and I fear she takes it seriously, takes *me* seriously, so that when I'm with her I must take everything I'm telling you seriously as well, when I might otherwise be laughing at it. She makes me *real*. But it's one thing to preach it, another to live it, so I'd be wiser to make do with small doses for now.

After my meal, I settle by the burner, one eye on the rain streaking the glass, another on the fire's cherry glow, and I think about Raul, then think about Amelia Grey and wonder idly if she ever thinks of me - because we never really know people do we? She might be secretly in love with me.

What?

You smile?

But you must look beyond your list of facts, look beyond the words I have written if you want to really know me. Human beings are like icebergs, their consciousness pricking through the surface of reality, but by far the greater part of us is unknown, reaching depths that even your technology is incapable of perceiving. Human beings, like icebergs, can also for most part be very cold.

I think of Rebecca, and of John Whittaker, and his bookshop's imminent demise. I think of the journal, and Emma Louise Hollander, and the world of 1860's Empire - and wonder what any of that has to do with me. I wonder why her name should light me up the way it does. Is it simply that to be infatuated with an imaginary muse is safer for a man, and less disappointing in the end when the muse turns out to be human? Dare I ask, Lewis: is it because the dead are easier to deify?

I take up her journal and flick through page after page of tiny, neat handwriting. It's also interspersed with little esoteric diagrams like a medieval alchemist's cookbook, or like the Voynitch manuscript - a thing of great esoteric wonder, yet revered equally as a tome of outrageous nonsense.

Is that also what we have here?

I pick a page at random and dive in.

There are three primary conduits of the pranic energy: the central, analogous to the spine, is neutral and therein lies the unification of all duality. Its colour is blue. To ride the energy of the central conduit is to ride the wind into a clear and empty state, for it is to touch the primordial awareness, to realise the identity of the awareness behind one's thoughts.

To the left and the right of the central conduit, lie the lesser pranic pathways. Their colours are white and red, their position varying with the sexes. In men the red conduit is on the left of the body, in women it is on the right. Its energy is positive, and carries wisdom. The white conduit carries the pranic energies related to the more negative emotions.

Although subtle in their nature, and therefore invisible to the surgeon's knife, the flow of pranic energy can be regulated by constriction of the gross body. Given that a state of wise and positive appreciation is more constructive than if one were fearful and lost in ignorance, it therefore suits the dream state if the white channel be constricted, to whit when lying down to sleep, to dream lucidly , and without negative turbulence, it is better for the man to lie on his right side, the woman on her left,...

I look up from these words to the rain streaked window and feel myself go slightly numb.

Dream yoga!

Emma Louise Hollander is a mystic, a spiritual alchemist, born into the middle Victorian period. She is a lucid dreamer, a time traveller, a shape shifter.

You see what happens when you invite the inner world to leak through into the outer, Lewis? Oh, I know, you're probably struggling with this by now. The best thing is to let go of your instinctive rejection of such language, and simply accept that there are people who think in these terms, and that I am one of them. If you would know me in any meaningful sense, then you must accept that this is so, or we have no future my friend, and you might as

well wash your hands of me now.

It's curious how her talk of the pranic channels mirrors my own knowledge, gleaned from twentieth century "new age" learning, but I'd not thought these sutras were available to the nineteenth century western lay person, indeed not really available outside of Tibet at all - a country closed to foreigners in Hollander's time.

I'm thinking of the Golden Dawn movement, a splinter from the Masonic order, but open to women as well as men. They were Hermeticists, magicians, mystics. Might she have been an adept? The problem with that, Lewis, is the genesis of the Golden Dawn movement was in the latter part of the nineteenth century. But there may have been others - earlier,...

For someone of my admittedly eccentric interests, this is quite a find!

I look up from the book and into the rain streaked sky and I realise the book's coming has been flagged twice, once in the gross reality of Strickland's office, when I looked upon his diary, and again in the dream of the public house when it was my priestess who held the book, as if hinting that she would shortly be slipping it into my path. And it was this book in the dream that had carried the initials RBR, the mark of ownership, the origin, the genesis of these writings,... also the stone, the truth,... asteroid, the wrath of heaven, the hammer of god,... curious string of association here, Lewis, but it brings me finally to Shiva, Hindu goddess of transformation.

It's just unfortunate this particular deity sets about her task by destroying the old order first. But I'm not thinking about that yet. All I'm thinking is who the hell is RBR?

Chapter 12

I should not have tackled this so late in the day. I'm intrigued by it, you see? And the mystery will contaminate my dreams, when I had so wanted not to be distracted from engaging with my lady vicar, who seems the more alluring muse right now. The rain is still rattling against the glazing, dark clouds bringing on a premature dusk. The cabin is cool, robbed of sunlight. I draw closer to the fire, sit cross legged on the rug, upturned palm on upturned palm, and I lower my senses to meditate.

At some point then between dusk and dark, the rain ceases, and the silence is immense. It disturbs me from resting in emptiness, and I feel troubled by it. And that it troubles me troubles me more, for any unease we carry through from the day will taint our dreams, make them harder to tame. I hear a sudden report from the rafters, a click, a snap,... wood cooling, relaxing,... or maybe a presence? I twitch in irrational alarm at the sound, feel the hairs on my neck rising. I am normally immune to these things.

I try not to let it grow, this sense of *something*, but once the mind is in the mood it mostly does what it will and I begin to feel afraid,... afraid of being alone here, so far from anyone, afraid even of the darkness. This is stupid. *I never feel this way. Never*. What ails me? Why do I suddenly desire the company of others? Is it to hide from the silence? Or is it to avoid the pathway I sense opening.

I close my eyes, breathe deep into myself and try once more to become diffused in stillness, but the feeling of unease persists. It makes my flesh crawl. I begin to feel exposed by the vast triple glazed panel of the window. Anyone or any *thing* out there can see me, while I cannot see it - only the mirror of my lone self - and I project into the dark all the low, creeping vileness that is literally imaginable.

These are childish fears, Timothy.

Let them go.

I breathe deep and release the Dakinis.

Yes, Dakini

Unusual word, Lewis - a term borrowed from Tibetan Buddhism and the sutras of sleep and dreams. I wonder if Emma Louise Hollander was familiar with them? They are a protective warrior goddess, an archetype, and entirely imaginary of course, though

still powerful. They are beautiful, watchful, wrathful, wise, and that they should have come to hand so easily worries me, for it suggests they were ready for trouble.

It's all right; I'm aware the word "Dakini" does not move comfortably over the western tongue. It perhaps even conjures up images of some kind of new-fangled swimwear, so for your convenience in future, I shall call them simply my girls, but don't allow this to diminish in your mind the degree to which I revere these beings. I would never venture into the dreaming without the reassurance that I could call upon them at any time.

I count seven of them. They settle in the rooms of the house, olive skinned, pale robed, curved weapons glinting in the darkness, their supernatural eyes able to see the things I cannot. They step out into the forest, patrolling, sensing, clearing away any presence they do not approve of. My girls are fierce against the night terrors, but infinitely compassionate and patient with my shortcomings. I am a child in their presence. When I leave this world it will be they who ferry me across the Styx and assure my safe passage into the Summerlands beyond it. But for now, in their presence, I feel indestructible and supernaturally calm.

As my mood steadies, I feel my girls settling down for the night, securing me in their midst.

To summon and deploy one's Dakinis is a stage in the Yoga of dream, their protection keeping out the last vestiges of the day's turmoil. They sense my fatigue, and urge me wordlessly to bed. They never speak, unless they have assumed the identity of someone else. I feel gentle arms about me, guiding me upstairs. There is perfume and softness. The bed is already prepared. Cool hands undress me, fold me under the covers. I realise I might be dreaming this from my dream cabin, that I might be about to waken into the real version of it, and not the other way around. I would struggle to know the difference now, and admit to being pleasantly confused.

I lay on my right side, compress the negative pranic channel, imagine a red energetic presence at my throat, and I follow it through into another life.

Stay with me, Lewis.

I realise none of this is relevant to your purpose of risk-assessing me, but I'm sure you'll find it interesting all the same. It's all just imagination, remember, but then *everything,* no matter how real it

seems to you right now, is imagined. Trust me on this. It is the only way *anything* can exist at all.

Where am I now?

Ah! This is new.

I'm in the Parish Church, Middleton, where I attended Sunday School. Victorian, gothic revival, ornate tiling and lush stained glass. I'm looking at the colours of the saints as the light streams through and I'm wondering if the artists had in mind notions of the subtle energies when they chose them. I rather doubt it, yet they seem to have hit upon them as if by instinct.

The pulpit is ornate, octagonal, raised above the congregation and enwrapped by an eagle's wings. It's a common shamanic vehicle, Lewis.

White robed, there stands my priestess, my lady vicar - black undershirt, white collar, and long black hair.

With a jolt I snap into the lucid state and begin to live, to breathe this place. But I'm not alone, and this is unusual. There's a smell of roses, and something lemony, sharp. Beside me is my partner. She wears a very sober dress, hat, voluminous auburn curls held in netting - not young, but very beautiful. We are sitting closer than acquaintances, thighs touching, pressing through the heat of intimacy, the heat of lovers.

Rebecca?

"No," she whispers. "Emma."

Why did I think it would be Rebecca? *Curious, Timothy.* The world begins to fade, I breathe it back through a haze of red, steady it, focus on the lines of my palms. Wedding band? Is that mine? I've not worn a ring in years. Then this is a past life? No. Don't question it. Don't try to explain it in terms you understand, because you will never understand it by *thinking*. Just let it be.

Is that me speaking to myself, or is it her?

And what is my vicar saying?

"*Release your souls,... all the parts of yourself. Gather yourselves, then dissolve yourselves into the light of non-dual awareness.*"

It does not sound very C.of E., Lewis. It sounds more like something I might write if I was trying to appear clever. She looks at me directly, singles me out from the crowd and winks knowingly.

Yes,... I'm bull-shitting.

There are motes of dust floating in angular columns of sunlight. Red light, amber, green, blue. They paint pools of light upon the

marble tiles of the floor. Before me, Raul and Dora sit enraptured. Raul wears a double breasted de mob suit, Dora something from the nineteen twenties.

Losing it again. Feel hot,... sweat prickling at the top of my head. I always used to fear fainting in church. Will my girls allow such a thing? No,... I see them stealing in, creeping into the empty spaces among the pews, their exotic, almost transparent robes and curved blades seeming not to be noticed among this staid Victorian crowd. They are like the pictures I have seen of classical Greek and Roman women - beautiful, sylph-like.

Emma notices and draws breath, as if afraid of them. But how can she be afraid? No one can die in this place. We are all of us already dead. All of us not yet even born.

"Are they with you?" she asks.

"Yes."

"I'm not here to harm you, Timothy. This is not a wrathful dream."

"Then you have nothing to fear from them. Relax."

She breathes easier. Could it be she is truly afraid of them? Afraid of what, exactly? Her hand closes around mine. There's a heat in it, a warmth that soaks deep and unbalances me. Would she steal me from them? I lose focus completely, float back to a semi-conscious trance, eventually rising to darkness, to the cool of my bedroom and the sound of rainfall once more.

Damn! Still raining?

At this rate, the beck will be up by morning and the waterwheel washed all the way down to the lake. Then I focus, and think to myself, what was I just dreaming?

'Droid. 'Droid.

Where's the fucking 'Droid?

My hand fumbles over the night-stand, but I can't find it. Did I leave it downstairs in my jacket?

It's four am, dawn still some distance off, but sleep and dream-time are lost now. I slide from bed, stick my toes in my slippers, pull on a cosy gown and pad my way into the kitchen. The cabin is calm, and comfortably cool, the silence of it not frightening any more. I brew tea, wonder what the vicar was saying. She spoke more like a lama, than a vicar. Then I curse myself for having let Emma in to confuse things - but I had no choice; the encounter with her journal was too powerful for it to have left no lasting

impression.

At least she seemed friendly.

Also disturbingly real.

I catch the dying embers of the burner, toss on sticks, breathe a smoky life back into it, then ease myself onto the sofa and contemplate my upcoming meeting with Rebecca - *dinner, remember Lewis*? I often sleep on the sofa, then I can be wakened by the sun's first peep and see in the dawn over the fells. But the sofa puzzles me this morning; I thought I'd replaced it last year for a leather one, yet the fabric remains. It's old and tartan-stripy, thread-worn and holed in places where my aunt's cigarettes have narrowly avoided burning the entire place down.

Ah!

Dream trigger.

Here we go: I catch myself, look across at the glass, see myself reflected there in blackness, with the void beyond, see also Emma, in the long sober dress of the Victorian gentlewoman, waiting for me to catch up with her. She's set the hat aside, loosened her collar, as if alone in her boudoir. She's thumbing through her journal. Though she does not look up, she knows I am observing her reflection.

"You mustn't take any of this too seriously?" she says.

"Oh?"

"I'm very young when I write it. So much of it is aspirational you know? Not practical."

"The bit I read sounded okay."

"You're very kind, but I'm caught up in all that mystical, mythical, eastern symbolism: the Lotus flowers, the shapes of the Sanskrit letters, the names of all the deities to be called upon. You know - the *Dakinis* and all that malarkey. I find the exoticism terribly alluring of course, but it doesn't fit that well with the western mind. I just focus on the light now, and the channels, keep it abstract. Not too literal."

"I have no problem with the Dakinis."

"That's because you're a man, darling. And you prefer to call them your girls, which is very sexist. And a little demeaning of them."

"Good point."

"But having said that, you mean well, and I suppose the Gods must have forgiven you, for your girls seem most diligent in their

service towards you." She sighs. "It's useful to have the original teachings as a touchstone, of course, but we must always translate them into our own familiar culture, and even then be ready to discard them when some fresh new insight comes along - otherwise we just get lost in the ritual, and we lose our power. "

"*All true things must change. And what does not change cannot be true.*"

"Ah,... you quote the Sage of Kusnacht?" She smiles mysteriously."Remember Timothy, I do not always know what you know. Am I alive? Or am I dead? Or did I never live? All these things you must be wondering."

The darkness is thinning, dawn now rendering the shapes of the treetops and the most vividly lucid phase of the dreaming, a phase that is more real than any reality I know. She sighs, settles back into her chair as if to say: "I'm here for a while".

Still I do not look at her directly, but keep my eyes upon the ragged fells beyond. I'm probably in the second phase of sleep now, when dreams stabilise, take on focus. It is the most peaceful feeling, seeing her reflected like that, as if viewing the dream of us both through a scrying mirror. I'm nervous with her. I've talked to entities before, in dreams, but like I explained to Whittaker, I have yet to convince myself of their objective reality. Most I believe, are thought-forms spun from our own complexes - the things they say coming out of the things we want them to say, subject and object being one. But others? Yes, others have a self-determinate quality about them, as if they are the projections of other souls - both living and long dead, all coexisting in the dreaming. We are of course all of us woven from the energetic matrix of the soul of the world - the *anima-mundi* of the alchemists, therefore the differences between dream entities lies only in their lineage.

Is Emma thought-spun from the *anima-mundi*, as I am? Or is she born of a lesser god, through me? Is she my child, or my sister? Or, as in the dream of Lao Tzu, am I born of a lesser god through her dreaming of me?

"Interesting point," she says, though I have asked no question. "The dilemma of the dreaming mind! But as you know, it's best not to think about it too deeply. We can speculate for ever in this realm, and the funny thing is, everything is true, just as everything is false. We should focus more on what's before us, or we'll become useless to each other."

"I agree. But,... what do you want from me?"

"Should the question not be: what do *you* want from *me*? It's all right, I know you don't know. Nor do I. But we are bound across the centuries for some reason. So, let's just enjoy each other's company a while, shall we?" She looks around. "I like what you've done with your,... what do call this,...a chalet? It has a solid feel. A good base."

"Thank you."

"I've done the same with my place, though my view is of mountains and desert."

"I'm guessing you're familiar with India then. Dreaming from the Western frontier perhaps?"

"Very good. Yes. Close by the Karachi Cantonment. And here, where are we here,... it feels so wonderfully familiar - the air, the light?"

"You don't know?"

"I have a very limited view of your reality, Timothy. I come to it only through you, through the spaces you project - though space is perhaps not the best word."

"It's the English Lakes."

"I thought so. How I love the Lakes! I came out to India in the late forties. But my last summer in England, I spent at my grandfather's house on Windermere."

"Really? That's quite a,... connection,..."

"And I met Wordsworth, you know - he was a friend of my grandfather's."

"Wordsworth? Another synchronicity."

"Yes, but we must be careful of syncronicities, darling. They so rarely explain themselves, at least in terms we understand. I see you have his books - Wordsworth - nice to know he's still popular. He was everything I imagined - quite sprightly for his age, stork-like in gait and stature, and the most wonderful eyes."

"I was at his grave today - so, I'm projecting all of this, aren't I?"

"It's possible. Anything can be true, if that's how we want it to be. Otherwise all we have is what we see. Remind me - when did he die? I mean from your perspective. "

"1850."

"Ah,... sad,... but then we're all of us already dead, Timothy. Just as we are all of us alive, somewhere,... some-when,... and then, like us now, also caught up somewhere outside of time, in between. I know you know this, even if you think you do not know it."

She runs her hand over her hair and I catch the glint of gold on her finger. "You're married? I'd not noticed your ring before, at the church."

"I was wearing gloves, then."

"So, you went out to India to be with your husband?"

"Yes. He's in the civil service. We spend our time at Bombay mostly,... dreadful place; Europeans dropping like flies. It'll most likely get us too, soon enough - it usually does - him first, poor dear, the hours he works. Then me. But I do love Karachi. Others hate it, call it the last place on earth, and it's certainly not a good place to be in the wet, but I much prefer the air,... and then we're so close to the deserts which feel so clean and dry, after the humidity at Bombay."

"And, your husband,... is he quite high up in the service?"

"Heavens no. We've never taken tea with the Viceroy, if that's what you mean, and most likely never shall. Oh,... he's ambitious and works hard,... but his boss is a vindictive ass and my husband shall never really make anything of himself - in his own eyes at least. In my own eyes we are each as perfect as we shall ever be, no matter what we do in life. And what he'd most like to do is retire to a little house in Chelsea, get into town now and then, but mostly smoke his pipe, grow rhubarb and sing his heart out in church every Sunday. Which is mostly what he does now, of course, since that's his chosen Summerland."

"Wait,... am I your husband?"

She laughs. "Heavens no! Though we can explore that if you want to. It might be interesting. Do you get lonely here?"

"Sometimes, but I don't mind it."

She nods. "I'm lonely. I married for the security of his family's money, and his civil service pension. Had I not, my only option would have been to work as a governess. And I am not a teacher, Timothy. Not like you. And no one really understands my world. The other service wives, the servants, the dry sterility of it, the bigotry, the false parade,... you know?"

"I understand. I feel the same."

"Yes,... yes I know you do. Is this what connects us, do you think? Is this why my old journal should turn up in a bookshop in Penrith, that a man about to lose his business should save it from the dustbin, with you in mind."

"I *am* dreaming you - otherwise how would you know that?"

"Questions Timothy, questions,... there is no sense to be made here, my love. We are too close to the dissolution of duality, too close to the light of oneness for anything to make a literal kind of sense. And of course you're dreaming me. You know you are. In which case, think of an answer and it shall be true."

"I won't find you will I, when I research you?"

"You might. My notebook clearly exists in your waking reality. Alas it is my only claim to immortality. I shall most likely be dead before I'm forty, and we women rarely make much of a name for ourselves. For ever in the shadow of our men, you see? You might have more luck with my husband, Adam George Hollander, and through him find some trace of me in the census records - if it's the veridical details you seek. Though why bother? They make no difference in the end."

"Veridical details are useful in determining what is and what is not fraudulent or delusional."

She laughs. "Even as you say it, you know it is not true. We seek no audience. Ours is not an evangelical order. Those who come to it do so of their own accord, in their own time."

"Order?"

"We are pilgrims, Timothy. We flirt with the void. We walk nightly where others fear to tread."

This is no ordinary daemon. I can usually dismiss them when their talk becomes sinister or disturbing. Emma is pushing me, lighting up areas of my mind in recognition of parts of myself I have long denied. Try a change of subject: "Does your husband make it home to Chelsea? I mean, in reality."

"Alas no." She sighs, gives a wry smile. "Nor do I."

"Then I'm talking to a ghost?"

"No,... only to my dreaming self." She smiles, tenderly. "Confusing, isn't it? And at the risk of further confusing you, I should tell you that we already know one another."

It doesn't confuse me at all. The dream allows this shape-shifting of facts to feel like a comfortable truth. "I used to write to you, didn't I?"

She nods. "I'm sorry your wife misunderstood the way it was between us. Normal people are weird, aren't they?"

Rebecca said that: *Normal people are weird?*. I *am* dreaming this. Well,.. of course you're dreaming this Timothy - wake up man - no don't wake up! Whatever you do don't wake up! Not yet; this is far

too interesting!

"We must be flexible, Timothy, we are not piecing together a jigsaw here. The pieces do not fit exactly. We are painting a picture. Brush strokes need only be approximate in the beginning. We have plenty of time to work them into a more pleasing likeness, if we choose. Though when we look back, the likeness will have been there all along."

Strong emotion will break a dream open, spill you back into material reality - which is our default position, at least while we live. I feel a mix of things: fear perhaps, elation too, combining to form a blended vortex of energy that seeks direction. Pray God it can be directed constructively. I take a breath, steady myself,...

"Look at me," she says.

"I can't, not directly."

"Please look at me."

"It doesn't matter if I look at you directly or not. We're dreaming. How we see each other is irrelevant."

"Not irrelevant. Symbolic. Look at me directly. Face me, Timothy. Face *up* to me, to the *possibility* of me."

"You may lose me."

"I shall never lose you. I promise you that. I have become the most devoted of your Dakinis."

"All right, but don't shape-shift into something or someone else. Please!"

She laughs. "Into Rebecca perhaps? All right, I promise. But really, you need to examine your feelings there too, darling."

"Examine?"

"Yes. To begin with you can stop denying them."

I turn into the room and see her, comfortably poised in the chair, and sharp, like an old photograph, every detail of her crackling with energy, but too real,... dazzling. Hard to look at. "Blur yourself out a bit, will you? Your energy's too intense."

She fades a fraction. "Better?"

I wonder: "Emma?"

Yes,... it's Emma,... she used to sign herself as M! M for Emma. So it was all true. I did channel her. No! It only seems true because I'm dreaming it. When I wake up, I'll either forget all of this, or the details will be different and will seem like nonsense.

"Walk with me?" she asks.

I suppose I must have dressed - I don't remember. The next thing

we're strolling through the forest. The dawn is humid. I can smell leaf mould and mountain air. The stream is lively as we trace its sinewy course up hill. The path forks at a standing stone painted with the dappled patterns of a sun that is not yet risen. I've been here before, with my beautiful vicar.

"Details, Timothy,... let them slide, give them room."

Stone. Cast in stone.

Leave it now.

We take the lighter path, the forest thins and the views open to reveal mountains, red and gold like great petrified flames. This is no longer the Lake District. The paths have become dry and dusty. In the distance a long line of camels make their way into an immense shimmering heat. She points to a curve of low hills, and a patch of green, an oasis amid the arid wastes.

"My bungalow," she says.

As is the way with dreams, I can see it clearly, though it must be a mile away - white timber, wide verandas, a grove of tamarind trees. "It's very beautiful."

"If you should ever find yourself lost and lonely, Timothy, you know where my door is. You shall always find me there. You used to write so tenderly, though you did not suspect me to be in any way real. It touched me deeply. Allow me to be of service to you, now, if I can."

She's saying goodbye. I will not be following her down to the bungalow, but returning alone to the cabin. She places a hand on my chest, fingers spread - not to repel, but to steady me. She sighs, thinks a moment,... thinks hard on what to say, and I realise this is what she has really come to tell me.

"My love, I've met many travellers in the dreaming. As you know, time is rather a flexible concept here. I know you are ahead of me in your waking time-line, that you have the familiarity of history when you look at me, at the way I present myself, and my dreaming, while I see the strangeness of the new when I look at you. You know there are many possible lines of time open to us, but we tend to be aware only of the more probable, and of the more probable of your time-lines,... forgive me,... I've not met any travellers who are ahead of you. I don't know if that's because my vision is limited by my inexperience, or if there's more to it."

"More to it?"

"That you will be among the last of your lineage to venture here,

into the dreaming."

She reaches up, brushes my cheek with the back of her hand, then dispatches me with a kiss.

"Think on it," she says.

Chapter 13

I rise, as if from a pit of mud, scraping it from my eyes so I might see again, only to realise it's still dark,... 4 a.m. Again. To explore the dreaming is sometimes to gain time, but that's not always a blessing. I grope for the 'Droid; it wakes to my touch, then I lie back and reel the dream in as much as I can.

My muse, the one whose letters sparked the ruin of my marriage, I had named M. I had thought M for Muse. But M, for Emma, seems now all the more plausible, if only because the dream suggests it. The mood of the dream had been sombre, even urgent towards the end, and I am left with the impression she was keeping open a door for me, laying down a marker in the dreaming by which to navigate should I ever lose my way. But why would she do that, when she knew I already had the cabin? Is this another safe exit? Or is it a trap? When one throws open an unguarded door in the dreaming, one never knows who is going to enter.

Friend or foe.

Forgive me; too many questions before breakfast can spoil a man's day. Am I telling you Emma is sister to my thoughts, or a child of them? I would like to answer “sister”, because the dreaming can be a lonely place - just you and all your Jungian projections - so a genuine sister in the dreaming would be a treasure beyond all imagining.

No pun intended.

You've heard of Solipsism, Lewis? Well, it’s true we can never prove for certain the world exists outside our own heads, nor if we are the only person in it. How do we know we are not at the centre of some super-real hallucination? It's harder than you might think to refute such an appalling idea, and it makes the world at times a lonely, pointless place. As for the dreaming itself, I have described to you a place where we can make anything happen, a place where *anything* can be true, but likewise what would be the point of that?

You’re thinking of lovers?

Dream lovers might be fun for a while, but a woman we have spun from our thoughts in the dreaming and who says yes to our every whim soon becomes tiresome. Trust me on this. Likewise our search for other things to stimulate us quickly stales when there is no limit placed upon the things we can invent to amuse ourselves.

It's only when we encounter a thing we cannot control, and can only make way in cooperation with it, do we learn anything at all and feel ourselves truly part of a greater reality.

Anyway,...

I breakfast early, and wait for the first transparency of dawn, then fasten on my boots and take the path by the beck - the one I'd followed with Emma last night. I am looking this time for the interface between my dream and hers. I hear you complain that it was me who dreamed of Emma, and it’s hard to argue with that, except the feeling of the dream was that we had shared the space, the timeless void of it, as dreaming souls separated only by our wakefulness in time.

Of course there is no standing stone in the woods here, and the land does not give way to openness and wide vistas, but rises sharp instead beneath dark crags that are held in time like frozen rock-slides. And the grass is coarse, acid loving, sharp scented, and the air has a metallic taste.

Separated only by our wakefulness in time.

Whatever does that mean Timothy?

I climb.

Breathless at a thousand feet, clouds brushing my head, the fell-tops are truncated and lost to the nether world. Black crags loom from paleness. They drip a dewy, mineral rich water, are cold to touch and they speak of great antiquity. These crags were here when Emma set sail for India in the 1840's. It was a journey of six months in those days, cheap passage around the Cape of Good Hope in worm riddled hulks. She must have felt like she was leaving behind a life she would never know again.

Yes, I'm treating the historical details as real enough, and I will check them, next time I'm in range of the Internet and my Ancestry.com account.

But the crags are older than that.

They were here when Homer first sang the Iliad, when Alexander’s army swept through the deserts of ancient Sind. They were here when the men who walked this land dreamed of their hunts and shared their dreams before hunting. So many generations gone! And the rock remains apparently untouched even by its slow dissolution in rain and geological time.

Rock, Lewis: a standing stone, a rock from space, and now my spontaneous musing on this rocky fellside.

Themes repeating.

Hidden meanings.

The world appearing as allegory.

Or as nonsense.

So fleeting quick our lives when measured against the age of the earth, eh Lewis? It's tempting to think we have no meaning, that religion is just a story got up to ease our fears of annihilation, our horror at the fact that the lives of our brethren end suddenly and pointlessly every day, and that ours might any day end the same.

The mist drifts down, encloses me in vagueness, paints strange shapes in the air. Vague rises in the path take on the proportions of unknown mountains, and the familiar way-marks dissolve to nothing. Only the map of the hill I carry in my head can guide me to the top now, and to the dripping cairn that shivers there.

Rain, pitter pattering in thick, warm spats. Sections of the sky are darkening, deeper grey in the mist, then green, then suddenly brightening again as the pale disc of the sun looms briefly, allowing me to orient myself to its face, roughly South of East. I'm wondering about the generations who will follow me, and then I remember Emma's words from the dream, that she knows of no travellers from my own future, and strangely, nor do I. All my travels there reveal of mankind is what lies in his history, not his future!

Why is that, I wonder?

Since the dreaming occupies the timeless void, I've always held the belief that it transcends time, that there is nothing special about my line in time, that I am not on the frontier of the known. We can have premonitions of things that will happen years in advance, suggesting that at least part of us has such foresight. Then why not Emma? Surely she would know of a time in my distant future, met generations of the future, dead and dreaming, who can speak of all the technological marvels to come.

Does that mean we are the last, that there is nothing to follow my own generation? I'm reminded then of the asteroid.

Is that it?

Is this the end of mankind?

What a profoundly altered perspective that would usher in, Lewis. What difference then Strickland's dress policy? What difference then my contempt for it? I feel a sudden sinking at the thought, realise it might be true, then push it deep beneath the surface of the lake, where I might ignore it a while longer.

Annihilation?

Don't be silly, Timothy. What kind of God would let that happen?

The same who presides over a world of war, rape, corruption, terror-bogeymen and economic collapse - same as it's ever been - and powerless to prevent it.

The mist burns, blows off like steam, and I am revealed beneath a perfect cobalt blue dome of sky. I am myself, alone, atop the world. Lush green ferny hills lap the khaki grassed heights, and then the black crags above - line upon line of them, veins of quartzite glinting, shadows crackling as the detail of every rock and blade of grass is crisply delineated in the sun.

My heart moves, and I feel my aloneness as I bear witness. Then I feel a twist of longing, a sadness that none shall ever know the beauty I see at this moment, and my heart aches at the emptiness and at the grasping of our lives beyond the dreaming. And I lament also that the dreaming renders me useless for the life I have yet to live, that it makes me ill adjusted, unsuitable, unemployable,...

Unlovable.

I am ready to move on, Lewis. But the world offers me nothing, no room to grow. Only in the dreaming now can I be truly free.

We'll do as Raul advises next time, Timothy: a holiday in the sun, somewhere where there are sufficient women who might be up for it, and where even we cannot fail to get laid. Which reminds me. I have a date tonight, with Rebecca Rayworth - Religious/Moral Studies.

Freudian slip.

Getting laid is the last thing on my mind, Doctor.

I check the 'Droid. The GPS pinpoints me on the summit for your convenience, Lewis. There is a little map and x marks the spot. We always have our technology, but it's not to be relied upon, nor even trusted to keep our secrets safe. I note I have a few bars of signal - not uncommon on the tops, but again never to be relied upon. I take the opportunity to squirt my narrative into the clouds for you. You never know, in spite of my protestation to the contrary, the next time you hear from me, I might have risen from a bed in the Albion Hotel, fresh from making love with Rebecca.

You don't think so?

I don't think so either.

What Rebecca wants from me is more complicated than sex – it

always is at our age. I know this because my thoughts have been in a knot since I last talked to her. Nor do I project my muse upon her. I do not see the goddess in her, broken as she is. I can see only the human being in her eyes.

Hazel eyes, liquid,... beautiful.

Chapter 14

Lunch at the cabin. Cold meats and potatoes - home grown. And strawberries from the now rampant plantings I made some years ago - deep red, sweet, like a lover's lips. I think about my wife, wonder if she's happy now, then find my hand reaching as if of its own volition for the journal of Emma Louise Hollander:

To travel with another soul is not so difficult, if the techniques be employed consistently. One must first establish an energetic connection, and a trusting rapport. Deep friendship is the best and most ideal course, though not always possible if it's a recent acquaintance or an adept we wish to introduce and guide through the dream time.

Certain Yogis will recommend sexual intercourse as an efficient preliminary in this case - if performed with an attitude of mutual tenderness and respect, though one must be careful as a woman in one's choices, if the adept be a man. For sexual techniques, they are best reserved for female companions, if one can be had, for the simple reason one is less likely to become impregnated by another woman.

For myself however, I discount the method and have learned that if one's partner has sufficient presence, the necessary connection will be made regardless of whether intercourse takes place or not. Exchange an item of clothing, a bauble, an intimate belonging, then wear or carry it about your person. Meditate together, lay your palms facing upwards and, if you be the guide, have your partner lay their palm facing upwards into yours. Say nothing for an hour, but feel their energetic presence.

Timings play their part, certain yogis paying much attention to the astrological charts. For myself I would suggest periods around the New Moon are most successful. My suspicion is that ordinarily the Sun's energetic presence interferes with the subtle human energy field, that when the moon enters her dark phase, she puts herself in the way of the sun's masculinity and the mind can then more easily navigate the spaces in between. It is the sun, unchecked, whose proximity separates us with its noise,...

For the dream time, lie together, and each prepare in the normal way - the man on his right side, the woman on her left. Each visualise the red light at one's throat centre while at the same time feeling the energetic presence of one's partner. If lucidity is attained, one's partner ought to be somewhere in the vicinity of the dreamscape, and easily detected by

memory of their energetic signature.

Journey well together, but on return, do not share your experience with each other in the waking hours with a view to obtaining the veridical details. There is no saying how the individual experience will be affected by contamination from waking anxieties. Stories will not compare word for word, as the dream time is not a literal environment, and journeying to obtain said veridical details alone will be sufficient to delay one's entry into the fuller life of the dreaming.

We are painting a picture, and each line need not be accurately drawn at first, so long as together all lines convey the necessary experiential impressions.

She writes in that verbose, Victorian style doesn't she? Educated, but not without a certain dry humour.

Let me translate this for you Lewis: Mutual dream travel.

Yes, I know what you're thinking. This is the worst of all New Age mumbo jumbo. But the Sufis write of it, as do the Tibetan dream adepts. Westerners as a rule don't, because it's considered impossible, even among the lucid dreamers, which is not to say it's *actually* impossible, only that our minds are cautious about what to accept.

But the sex?

Emma speaks of sexual techniques. Initiation. This is reading like an hermetic order now with pagan rites and sexual tantras,... Who was she? *What was she*? Or more to the point, what am I making her into?

Early evening, now and not long to wait.

What for?

For my dinner date with Rebecca, Lewis.

Remember?

I look forward to seeing her again. Indeed the thought electrifies me!

I have bathed and am carefully shaved, the old grey whiskers that normally escape around my neck have been sought out and cleared. I think it makes me look younger. I have chosen a casual jacket for its voluminous pockets, and carry Emma's journal in one of them for protection against the presence of Rebecca, in case she comes on too strongly. And I don't mean in a sexual way. I have a great respect and a liking for Rebecca. I think I would like to know her, and trust she's not the silly sort of girl who would ruin her reputation on the rocks of an impetuous and transient lust.

Did you say *girl*, Timothy? But she's forty if she's a day, old enough to have girls of her own.

I'm early setting out, wanting to make sure I arrive in good time, in case I have to hunt for the Albion Hotel. There are many such places that dot the shores of Windermere and which, from the road, are hard to see. The Volvo runs quietly this evening. That the air conditioning isn't working reassures me I am not dreaming, that when I meet Rebecca it will be in real-time, at a point along a time-line I am familiar with.

Do I state the obvious here?

I should perhaps warn you I've been known to dream of driving, and once travelled a hundred miles in a strange land before the fact of chilled air coming from the vents woke me to my more mundane reality, which was actually the busted sofa in my lounge where I was snoozing. So, this journey could take us anywhere, Lewis, whether it be real or dreamed.

Are you ready?

Let's go.

As I drive, I speculate: Did Emma's husband know about her?

As an official in the Indian service, I imagine he would have had little time to spare for his wife's esoteric fancies, just as Miranda had little time for mine. And she spoke of loneliness. She spoke of lying with men and women in pursuit of shared, mutual dreaming - or have I got that wrong? Did she mean this *literally*? She said she had discounted such methods, but does that mean she had abandoned them, after trying them out, or simply that she never indulged in them in the first place? You might find it unthinkable a woman of the nineteenth century, and one in her position, could have been so utterly seduced by these ideas to have risked being discovered in its most intimate practices,... and disgraced by them.

It would have ruined her.

And, by association,...

Him.

But we must not commit the usual error of thinking it was our generation who invented sex, Lewis.

Anyway.

There's a Union Jack flying from the gothic spire that forms the east wing of the Albion hotel. I wonder how far we are from the home of Emma's grandfather, the man who knew Wordsworth, and I wonder at the density of the connections that begin to constellate

now.

The Albion reeks of picture post-card Englishness, of Lake District tourism, of a "Brand". There is a Rolls Royce Phantom on the gravel. Wikipedia tells me it must be at least eighty years old, this machine, yet still looks impressive in glossy black and chrome and its flying lady all a-gleam.

The Albion is not the sort of place I would choose to stay - too expensive for a start - five hundred quid a night for a box-room, and cobwebs. And that's cheap. My car will be clamped if I leave it too long without a guest pass. It will cost me fifty pounds to have it released and only then after 10:30 pm. So says the crass notice on the otherwise quaintly ivied wall. Even at the higher end of the tourist industry, we have failed to grasp the subtleties of hospitality.

Transgress and we will make you suffer!

Only in the dreaming are we truly free.

The lobby is cavernous, in the country-house style. There's even a roaring fire, though it be twenty five degrees outside this evening. Closer inspection, however, reveals the fire to be a fake - just bits of flame-coloured silk rippling in an up-draught. Meanwhile, grim looking stags' heads line the panelled walls, cobwebs strung between their antlers.

There's no one at the reception desk.

No bell to ring.

I sit, and text Rebecca. "In lobby."

A gent in managerial guise materialises, eyes me as if I might have blown in like old leaves from the doormat.

"Can I help you, sir?"

Unfriendly tone, I think. They're quick to judge the volume of one's pocket here, that here is a man who would ask for tap, rather than bottled water at dinner. Can he help me? The 'Droid bleeps, advises me Rebecca is on her way. "No," I tell him. "Thank you."

It strikes me, then - the run of things - the dreaming, the journal, the meeting with Emma. Is it possible I am to induct Rebecca into the dreaming? If so, it's as well Emma discounts the sexual methods. I think back to her treatise and consider it equally unlikely Rebecca and I would ever simply lie down together in chaste but intimate contact beneath a duvet.

And then what tokens might we exchange?

Wait,... what was that?

Ah,.. I detect a tingle at the thought of sharing a bed with

Rebecca - just sharing it, mind, just spending the night! I'm curious; might she be patient with my creeping slowness?

You are, Timothy!

You're wondering about it!

You old dog, there is life in you yet!

"Are you a guest, sir?" The man persists, slightly officious, standing over me, encroaching on my body space - which I admit is more generously defined in me than in normal people. He knows I am not a guest. I feel he is threatening. Will he have me ejected if I don't divvy up a hurried reason for being there?

"I'm not a guest, no."

"I could serve you coffee perhaps?" He smiles, a rigid slit of a thing. *This is a hotel, sir. It is a business. It is not for sitting in, for free.*

Coffee? Hmm.

It would be what, in a place like this? Ten quid a cup? Service on a silver salver, balanced on the arm of a migrant girl sweating on a fraction of the minimum wage? Then what? Would you be tempting me with your miniature sandwiches - salmon and cucumber, mouldy cheddar - all dainty on the side, for a mere forty quid?

"No, thanks. My friend will be down in a moment."

My apologies, Lewis. As you've no doubt already discovered, I'm largely incomprehensible to others. I know it, which is why I rarely try to explain myself. And even you by now are perhaps wishing I had not bothered.

Rebecca must be a woman of independent means if she stays in places like this! It's hardly what one would expect on a teacher's salary. I wonder what they think of her, crumpled, and feigning ugliness. But then eccentricity, rudeness, or even criminality, is no barrier to the haunts of the nouveaux-riche, like this,.... only lack of money.

Perhaps the Phantom is hers?

Don't be silly Tim.

She enters from a side door, wearing a long towelling robe, and a towel around her hair. "You're early," she says. "So, you're either keen or bored. I was just chilling out by the pool."

I glance at my watch. Seven. *She did say seven, didn't she*? "You did say seven, didn't you?"

"Seven thirty, I think."

"Ah,... I'm sorry."

I imagine the obsequious uniform grinning at my embarrassment, imagine then that he is disappointed when Rebecca reaches up and kisses my cheek. I'm taken aback by this of course and find it curiously moving. She feels warm and tender in proximity, the brush of her cheek like the flutter of a humming-bird's wings against my skin. She feels exquisite, and smells,... of chlorine.

"Don't be silly," she says. "Thank you for coming. Why not sit with me by the pool for a bit? It's lovely just now. I was just about to go and get changed, honestly, but there's no hurry to eat is there?"

Just about to go up, she says? Miranda might have taken an hour or more to ready herself for dinner. Thirty minutes would barely have scratched the surface, yet for Rebecca it appears thirty minutes is ample.

I think I like that.

"Em,... no,... no hurry."

The tie of her gown unfolds and it falls open a fraction. She catches it, but not before I've seen her costume - a black one-piece. She's more girlish for her age than I'd thought: nice hips - hips she's adept at hiding in her frumpy fayre. But she was a dancer most of her life, and I don't suppose you lose your elegance merely on account of a broken leg.

"Good," she says. "We can perhaps talk for a bit. Really, I'm so glad you came. Thank you, Timothy."

Is she gushing? I think she is. What? Is that cynicism? Is it really so long since anyone was pleased to see you, Timothy? At least she's dropped the "Mr. Magowan".

She makes a good pace with her stick, seems animated with a nervous energy now, firing off sentences void of connectives. "Haven't booked anywhere," she's saying. "Eat out? In town. Somewhere?"

"Yes,... expensive here, I imagine."

"Very. Bowl of soup twenty quid. Rooms rates not too bad. Lure you in with those. Facilities lovely, but sting you with the extras,... so, basically eat nothing but the inclusive breakfast. Answer everything else they ask you with a very clear 'no'."

"I'll bear that in mind."

"So, do you know anywhere we can eat?"

"Em,... sure,... You want a traditional pub, or something like

Chinese or Indian?"

"Can we get a decent Indian around here?"

"Of course. Ambleside's not far. I know a place, fairly new. Worth a try. Really, I'm sorry, Rebecca. I have your message and it clearly says seven thirty."

"And like I said, don't worry about it. I'm hardly a stickler for time, and you're not exactly my beau, so you've nothing to prove by your punctuality, have you? It's just lovely to see you. I was,... worried you might actually be avoiding me. I was a little drunk last time you saw me, and you're not exactly quick off the mark replying to your texts."

"I know. The cabin's in a dead-zone, I have to wait until I'm in range of a signal before things catch up with me."

She smiles. "The world catching up with you, not the other way round. Raul warned me you're on the edge of the unknown up there."

"It's not so bad. Raul exaggerates."

"He also said you do strange things, like talk to fairies and journey to strange places in your head."

I laugh at this, but my blushing gives me away. "Raul is also a terrible gossip."

She eases herself onto a recliner by the pool. The pool is rendered azure by the use of tiles and lighting. It tries hard to forge an affinity with the lake, but this not the costa del-sol. Windermere is streaks of black and cobalt - not azure. It dreams on a different plane to this shallow pool.

"Do sit."

Her gown drifts open once more, reveals her legs, a flash of thigh. She catches me looking, and I blush again.

"You're curious about my scars?"

"I'm sorry,... no,..."

"Are you nervous with me?"

Am I? Yes, of course I am. I'm nervous with all women. It's in my DNA

"Sorry, I blush easily, that's all."

"I know."

She pulls back the gown, reveals a good length of well toned, lightly tanned thigh, then strokes her finger along a thin white line that runs from hip to knee on the outside of her right leg. Strange, I'm thinking. It might almost be painted on - such a long scar, yet it

does not pucker the flesh. Pale stockinged, one would not even notice. I feel myself blushing again at the thought of Rebecca in pale stockings.

Come on, Tim; you'll be breaking out into a sweat in a minute.

"There," she says. "Not too bad, I suppose. I must have rubbed gallons of Bio-oil into it. The amount of physio I've had on it you'd think I'd be able to do better though." She pounds the rather taut and shapely muscle. "The doctors say my limp is hysterical."

"What?"

"Not hysterical as in the wildly funny sense of course, just,... that it's all in my head. I tell them no, that if I put my weight on my leg, it hurts and I fall over. That doesn't sound hysterical to me."

Her leg is bent sharp at the knee. "It looks,... fairly flexible."

She's smiling, possibly at the colour of my face. "Oh yes," she says, then tucks her leg to her chest, then straightens it so her toes point at the sky. It's easy to see her as a dancer, now. "It's not bending it that's the problem," she says."It's keeping it straight when I put my weight on it."

"You can swim all right?"

She nods, then covers her legs, and I wonder at how much more comfortable I feel. Lame or no, she still has a dancer's legs, and legs are a particular weakness of mine.

Silly I know.

"Nice jacket," she says.

"Em,... thank you."

"Tweed?"

"My best one. And my newest."

"I'm flattered."

She uncoils the towel from her head, lets her hair fall, then rubs it dry. She's refreshing, nothing self conscious about her, and I sense she thinks little of her allure, assumes that no man would find her attractive because of the limp and the stick. I discover this endears her to me all the more. It seems I find her both attractive and puzzlingly complex - a fateful combination, Lewis. But Rebecca is hardly the archetypal femme-fatal. She's too bright, too bubbly; not enough languor for that.

Want her, Tim?

Yes I think so, at least... ordinarily I would. But there's nothing youthful nor possessive about my feelings. Nor do I lust after the shape of her under her clothes. I'm too old and too full of sleepy

thoughts for that these days, but there is something about her that fits easily with me now. It's the feeling she possesses something I lack, that in Rebecca Rayworth I shall find the completeness of myself - for such is love, and that's a curious thing for me to be thinking - I mean, that I might be contemplating *love* again.

"You should try other doctors," I tell her. "They're no different to anyone else - egotistical and opinionated, biased by their own experience. The trick is to find one who takes you seriously."

"Yes,..." she thinks for a moment. "Unless they're right and I am hysterical."

"It's possible,... there's a theory that most of our ills are emotional, but I doubt that includes a badly broken leg."

"Could you take me seriously, Timothy?"

What does she mean by this? "Well,... yes,..."

"No,.. I mean *seriously*."

"Absolutely. Why wouldn't I?"

"Because I'm a woman, and most men have problems with that. With women, I mean."

"We do? Well,... you're probably right, yes. We do. Most of us do."

"I know I'm right." She looks up as if addressing an imaginary audience. "For most men the world is divided into objects that are either fuckable or not. Excuse my French. The fuckable ones are not to be taken seriously - only fucked. Not that I'm claiming to be fuckable, you understand - I wouldn't know the first thing about that,.... which makes me an object of the other kind."

"Which is?"

"Not to be taken seriously either - but sometimes such things are collectable for sentimental reasons, like marbles and other small toys that little boys keep in their biscuit tins."

This is a strange turn of conversation, Lewis. I do have a collection of such items myself. They are in a Typhoo tea tin. And yes, there are the mementos of some women I keep in it, just the way she describes.

Safer in a tin.

"Are we so simplistic?" I ask.

"In my experience, yes," she replies "Though, in my dreams and fantasies, I still harbour some hope of finding a more complicated man."

"No pressure then. I'll try not to let you down."

She's sparring with me. Would she have me fight back? All right then: "You know, in my experience, women are also interested in just one thing."

"Which is?...."

"Babies of course. Men are simply a means to that end. And once the babies come along we're redundant, at least on the emotional level, good for nothing beyond changing light-bulbs, taking the bins to the gate and mowing lawns."

She appears to take umbrage, but even as she arches her brows she's smiling. "Oh, really? And how many babies have you been duped into fathering by broody baby machines?"

"Em,... none, actually. I fire blanks, apparently. Always have." Did I really just say that? Quickly Tim, change of subject! "I do have such a tin as you describe and I might be guilty of keeping women in it from time to time. But I'm also mindful that the pert bottom of today is tomorrow's cellulite wrinkled buttock. No sense holding on to ephemera."

She laughs.

As usual I'm trying to colour myself in as being entirely unattractive to women, but that's okay because Rebecca colours herself as being entirely unattractive to men. There have been so many misunderstandings in the past, Lewis, I cannot help it, and it's best to get the warts out of the way. Can you take me seriously, she asks? More to the point Rebecca, do you take me as seriously as you seem to be doing?

"Why did you come?" she asks.

Ah,.. wrong-footed. Think quickly, Tim. Nothing to say? Then whack the ball back into her court: "Why did you invite me?"

"Because, like I said at Raul's house, you interest me. The children, they talk about you - and Raul -they like it that you're rebels, non-conformists."

"Then Raul and I aren't doing them any favours are we? They'll have to conform sooner or later."

"Why should they? They love you. And they respect you. They trust you, the things you say,... they'll go the extra mile for you."

"Then we're deceiving them. It's all right to be a rebel, so long as you kiss sufficient ass to get yourself a proper job first."

"Then tell them so. It's one thing to have a proper job, and quite another to be the ass whose reason for being is to be kissed. The ass being - I don't know - people like our glorious leader, Strickland."

"Do we have to mention that name? I've already dreamed of him since coming on holiday."

"You have? Me too. Last night. Tell me your dream,..."

My word, she can be sparky! Or is it that you're not used to anyone who is even vaguely interested in the contents of your head, Timothy? So, tell her your dream. Tell her! "Sorry, my dreams are sealed."

Coward!

"Are you afraid I'll think you depraved?"

"What makes you think it was that kind of dream?"

"We all project our darker sides onto him, don't we. I'll tell you mine if you tell me yours."

"Okay, you first."

"All right. You asked for it. He wanted me to have my leg off and replaced with a plastic one, because he said it looked smarter and I wouldn't need a cane, and I was letting the school down by limping about all over the place. I could wear a trouser suit, he said, like Amelia Grey, that at least my arse was presentable enough in tight trousers, and no one would know my leg was false."

"And.... how did you feel about that?"

"I said I'd tell you my dream. I didn't give you permission to analyse it."

"Sorry,... force of habit,... I try to analyse all my dreams. I didn't mean to pry,... really. I'm sorry."

But she's smiling again, smiling at my blushes. "So," she says. "Your turn."

"My dream? Amelia Grey was performing oral sex on him while playing dominoes. While she was doing that he was sneaking a peek at her dominoes."

She claps her hands. "Really? Oh,... that beats mine. That's amazing. And curious our dreams should both feature Amelia, and him. Yes, I can see him doing that; looking at a woman's dominoes while she makes love to him. Okay. Let me analyse yours, then I'll let you analyse mine. How did you feel, seeing her doing that?"

"You wouldn't be analysing - you'd be projecting your own self into it."

"All right. But how did you feel?"

"Oh, resigned to it, I suppose. Of course all men want Amelia to do that to them, but my lack of self worth in that department leads me not to harbour false hopes. I was also concerned for her, that

she plays to her physical attributes, while not appreciating how easily unscrupulous men can use that to their advantage."

She looks surprised, is thoughtful for a moment. "That's interesting. You felt *compassion* for her?"

"Yes, of course."

"Oh, Timothy, that's so sweet."

"Not really. Just sentimental. Now, your turn. How did you feel?"

"How do you think I felt?"

"It's not fair to make me guess because then you're reading more about me, than revealing a little about yourself."

"All right. I was afraid to lose my leg, but felt ashamed at letting down the school, then felt angry with myself for feeling ashamed. I didn't want a plastic leg. The one I've got might not work the way I'd like it to, and I've got this scar that makes it unlikely I'll ever wear a miniskirt again. But it's flesh and blood and bone, and I still want to enjoy myself in the flesh."

She gives a shiver, pulls the robe about her more closely. "So, analyse that."

"I don't think I need to. You're sensitive about the way people see you over the scar and the limp."

"Yes,... yes of course I am."

"QED."

Rebecca, what do you want from me? I'm not a surgeon. Not a lover, not an impregnator, not even a shyster-healer. "You could always wear pale stockings and the scar would hardly show."

She uncovers her legs again, teasing me. "Hmm,... white fishnets perhaps? Yes,... that would work. A nice little suspender belt and white satin micro-pants, preferably with one of those cheese-slicer thong backs? Are they still *in*? Really, Timothy!"

"I,... I wasn't meaning that. You're as bad as Raul, twisting everything I say, just for a laugh."

"I also like watching you blush. It's rare in a man. And with you it's so easy. All I have to do is talk dirty."

Oh, Lewis, I like this woman.

I like her very much!

"It's growing cool," I say. "Don't you want to put some warmer things on?"

For a long time she makes no reply, but just stares back at me, reading something. Then she lifts her spectacles to her forehead and

turns me into an unfocussed blob: "You don't want me to feel cold?"

"No,... in fact I'm growing a little cool myself."

She persists. "But,... you don't like to think of me feeling cold?"

"No. Of course not."

She hugs herself. "You'd like to wrap me in something snug until I'm warm again? You feel,... compassionate towards me? Like you felt towards Amelia, in your dream?"

"Em,... aren't you over-analysing this a little?"

"No, I don't think I am." she reaches towards me suddenly. "You're right; I should get some clothes on. Help me up will you? I think my bums gone to sleep."

I find myself laughing, which is unusual. "You don't talk like a convent girl."

"Oh, you've no idea."

"When I see you at school, you look so - well - so old-school."

"Like you, you mean? Like butter wouldn't melt?" She's on her feet now. "Never in front of the children, Timothy. Moral honesty is one thing. Bad language is quite another. I've often scolded Raul over his tongue. I'd do it more but I suspect he likes being scolded by women. I'll be half an hour, dressing. Can you wait in reception? Do you mind?"

"My pleasure."

Her hand is hot, her grip sturdy, though she feels and looks so slight. She reaches for her cane, and I do the same, thinking to do the gentlemanly thing. She realises I'm reaching for it, and reaches all the harder to beat me to it. This happens in a split second of course and all impressions are subliminal. She's Independent and sparky - Rebecca Rayworth. I pull back my hand, but not before I notice her relax into acquiescence. She would have let me pass it to her.

She would have let me in.

Now who's over analysing, Timothy?

"Give me a head start?" she asks.

I nod, sit back in the lounger, and watch her go.

Chapter 15

She comes downstairs in a long blue dress. Why the stairs I don't know because she clearly struggles with them, and the elevator would be easier. I watch, suppressing my concern she might tumble and lose face in front of the supercilious ass who seems to observe from the reception desk without looking at either of us.

Am I dreaming this?

The dress is lovely, and un-crumpled, and possibly new. Dare I say it also reveals an impressive bosom? She catches me looking, reads my guilt at having questioned her competence on the stairs, but forgives me for it. Does she really read it? Does she really forgive it? Or do I project these things onto her? Is she my sister in the Great Unity, or child of my own thoughts? Is she my Dora or my Dorothy?

*Wordsworth, Lewis! O*h, do keep up.

She is your sister, Timothy. All beings here are your brothers and sisters. Only in the dreaming do we project our own children. Indeed, only in the dreaming Timothy can you have children at all.

Ha!

She's changed the cane, swapped the rather inelegant old-lady's bamboo crook of a thing for a thin, black wand, silver topped. It's lighter, I suppose and I wonder if this is her going out stick. She wears her hair unkempt and loose. It falls long, half way to her waist. I catch the faint scent of Chanel, and wonder if my interest in her comes out of the fact she seems to like something my wife did not.

It’s almost as if she taunts me with it.

Perhaps she might also, unlike my wife, like me.

Stop it, Tim - that was unbecoming.

Your wife wanted children and you could not give them to her.

What else is it about Rebecca that has me sitting here, what else could have me respond to her invitation? There's an energy about her, and for all of her infirmity, something sturdy - strong hands to grip the banister, strong hands upon her cane, a strong, straight arm to take the strain of her imbalance.

Heat and energy!

I felt it in her touch when I helped her up. I also feel it in the way she banters and spars. Oh, she’s combative for sure, but always

with a touch of humour and a quick smile to heal any accidental hurt. And she's a dancer, a creative spirit, expressing with her body what she feels inside! And what she's feeling now is frozen and stiff, and lopsided.

We walk out to a glorious amber evening. Swifts screech in formation as they circle the hotel. I wonder if the problem with her leg might not have its root in her back, that everyone has been looking in the wrong place. It's just a feeling, something also in the way she moves from a point slightly off centre.

"Your car or mine?" I ask.

"Yours I think. I intend drinking large quantities of chilled white wine. "

"Mine it is then. I see the Roller's gone. I wondered if it was yours."

She laughs, and that she laughs relaxes me, and that I find myself relaxing makes me realise I have grown tense with her - but tense for what reason? I want nothing from her.

Tense, Timothy, because you have yet to find out what it is she wants from you, Remember?

"No," she says. "Mine's the green camper. I call her Rosy - inappropriate, I know. The Roller belongs to the hotel. I don't think it works. I see them pushing it out of a morning, then pushing it back of an evening."

"You mean it's just for show?"

She gives me a cockeyed smile. "Like so many things in life, Tim."

She slips her hand under my arm, rests it there. It feels intimate, reassuring and kind. I must be dreaming her. I *must*.

"You really thought it might be mine - that I'm a millionairess on the quiet?"

"Well,... I wondered. Staying here. A place like this."

"Palatial and pretentious?" she sighs, as if resigned to the paradox. "I agree. But a girl likes a bit of pampering, and it's only once a year. Plus it's still a lot cheaper than jetting off on a continental holiday."

"You're probably right. Long time since I did that - a bit out of touch with things all round really. Take no notice of me. I'm just a grumpy old man."

"No, you're not grumpy. You're just,.... how shall I describe it? You're disappointed no one else sees things the way you do. You're

disappointed no one's ever shared your vision, or thought it important enough to even ask your views on it. And every time you open your mouth to explain yourself you see their eyes glazing over, like they can't be bothered and wouldn't understand anyway, so you simply don't make the effort any more - if indeed you ever did. Am I close?"

Closer than I dare admit. "I know I think strange things."

"You do have something of the other world about you, but don't think of leaving us behind just yet, Tim. Some of us might need you to stick around. Come on, I can see your car over there. How very *you*, by the way: A little battered. Two hundred thousand on the clock? Not everything works - just the important bits, I hope. But mostly indestructible. Am I right?"

"All except for the indestructible bit."

"Well, we're all mortal. But some of us weather life better than others. You have the look of a man capable of high mileage without complaining."

"Well, I don't know about the not complaining. I do seem to enjoy complaining these days, which is a bad sign, and hardly becoming."

"One of the pleasures of middle age, Tim. So long as we don't take things too seriously."

Hmm, she's right, but the problem is I take so little seriously these days I might as well not be here at all.

She steers me gently towards the car, we settle inside and she looks around.

"Interesting," she says.

"What?"

"Do you not feel that frisson? Girl alone in a man's car. About to be taken for a ride. And such a big car,... really! You could get a double mattress in the back."

"I think you know you're safe with me."

She gives a playful roll of her eyes. "I'm not sure I do actually. I mean, how's a girl to know that?"

"Eh? Have you changed your mind? Would you prefer to eat in the hotel?"

"Not at those prices. Anyway, you have a woman, alone, in your car, and you're telling me you're only interested in food?"

What's the right answer here? Honesty, always honesty, Tim. "Yes,... I think so. Have you been drinking already?"

"No, this is me sober. You should see me when I'm really drunk." She blushes. "All right, let's go. I suppose I'm safe enough. I just don't want to lose my self control and get pregnant at my age, so if you catch me drinking too much, you must tell me. I warn you, I drink like a fish,..."

"I know. I've seen you."

Sex,... she's bringing up the sex again. Why does she do this? Is it flirting? Does she think to seduce me with it? No, that can't be. What does she want with me?

"Are you always this direct with your dates?" I ask.

"I usually don't make it as far as dating," she replies. "Most men are put off by my peg-leg, and the rest are put off by the way I talk. So you'll forgive me enjoying my little coup. I was fed up waiting to be asked, so decided to do the asking instead. Sorry by the way,... about the pregnant thing. I was only joking."

"I know, it would be a miracle at your age."

"No need to be offensive, Timothy. I was thinking it would be more of a miracle with you firing blanks, as you put it."

"Ah,... yes. Touché. I'm sorry,..."

I talked about sex too, didn't I? See? Strange things are happening this evening. Are you sure you're not dreaming? What moon is it? Check the watch, but discretely,..."

It's coming up to new. A few more days. The moon in her dark aspect. The noise of the sun being cut out. A good time for travelling, in the dreaming.

"Is that the real reason you got divorced?" she asks. "Your wife wanted babies?" Then she bites her lip, thinks she's gone too far. "Sorry, too personal. That's not for joking about."

"It's all right."

The Volvo rumbles to life, and I let it run a bit, listening to the repetitive squeak from the fan-belt. It'll warm up in a moment. Meanwhile I think about what she said, about the babies.

"It was dressed up in more complicated terms than that," I tell her. "Things always are, aren't they? We invent complication to cover the simple fact of the cracks, but I think that was it at the bottom of things, yes. They say marriage is a compromise, but if one of you wants kids and the other can't produce them, what are you supposed to do?"

"And what *do* you do?"

"We spend all our lives either grasping or resisting, and all to

feed this tiny part of ourselves, the part that always has to feel better than, more than, cleverer than all the others out there. So what you do is stop resisting the inevitable. Stop grasping the improbable. Just let it go."

"And have you? Have you let go?"

I can't help the grin. "Of course not. Too scared of the chasm underneath me. But I'm trying."

She smiles beautifully, warmly, naturally. "It's odd to find a divorced man so magnanimous, especially when his ex-wife gets everything. They're usually very bitter about that. They say unkind things about women in general, afterwards I mean, when all the dust has settled. Tar them all with the same brush."

What else has Raul been telling her?

"She took mostly everything, yes, but it was nothing I wanted, or needed, or anything that mattered, really."

"Are you sure? If that's true, if you have no scars from the past, why are you so jumpy around women?"

"I'm not."

"You are,... you're jumpy with me. Why?"

"I'm,.. forgive me, Rebecca, I'm puzzled by you, that's all."

"Puzzled?"

"Women don't normally,...

"What? Out with it,..."

"I mean, they don't normally take an interest in me - they just don't. Not as lovers, or friends, or anything really. I'm just too strange. Too serious perhaps. So I'm wondering what it is you think I've got, that you want."

She gives me a stern look, and for a moment I'm frightened by it, but she softens it with a twitch of her lips, a smile about to break. "You think I'm playing you? Well thanks very much."

"Are you really saying there's nothing you want, other than to be my friend? I only ask because I do need a friend. A sympathetic woman friend would do me nicely right now, but we need to be honest with each other, Rebecca."

Ah,... I see the flicker of guilt now. I knew it!

"I,... do want to be friends with you, Timothy. But you're right, there is something else. And this thing,... I'm afraid to ask, because I know there's nothing I can offer you in return."

"What makes you think I'd want anything in return."

"Men always do."

Now it's my turn to pretend be offended, I think. "So,... what do you want with me, Rebecca?"

"Teach me to travel."

"To travel?"

"You know what I mean. In the dream-time."

"Where would you want to go?"

"Where do *you* go?"

"My path's never that clear. In truth I don't know where I'm going. My dream-time is no clearer than my waking time. It just affords me a little more flexibility, that's all."

"Well,... I know where I want to go. I want to dance again. They say it's so real, lucid dreaming. Realer than real. I want to dance, and really *feel* it."

When Rebecca is emotional, a dimple forms in her chin. I see it now, see also a mistiness in her eyes and suddenly it all become clear to me: she wants to explore the West End again, she wants to feel like she's flying on stage in front of an audience of ten thousand - really, really *feel* it. It's not a bad ambition, and much clearer than anything I've tried to do.

I'm relieved. I'd been expecting something complicated.

"Is that all? I mean,... sorry that came out wrong. I know it would mean a lot to you."

"But is it *possible*, Tim? And will you teach me how?"

"Yes, it's possible. But you don't need to learn how to travel, just to dream lucidly. And I can teach you that. Yes."

I snick the car into gear and press the accelerator, attempt to lose myself in motion, in steering up the gravel path to the main road. I cannot let her see I am emotional too.

If that's what she wants, then she shall dance again, and I will be glad to show her how. Really, Lewis, it's not difficult. With a little discipline, most of us can be dreaming lucidly in a matter of weeks.

"Thank you, Tim. Oh, and by the way,..."

"Hmm?"

"Your eyes are wet."

I wipe them hurriedly on the back of my sleeve. "Yes, they're stinging a little. Eyestrain,.. late night last night."

I may be wrong Lewis, but I think her hand has just brushed mine - lightly and momentarily - the touch of a butterfly's wing. I dare not look at her for fear my face is crimson. She passes me a tissue, dabs another to her own eyes.

"Me too," she says.

Chapter 16

Ambleside is unusually quiet for a mid-season evening - more like midwinter. I'd thought we might struggle with the restaurant and end up making do with chips on our knees on a chilly park bench. But the restaurant is empty and the resulting surfeit of waiters is eager to cater to our every whim. Menus come at us from all directions, delivered with big, overly friendly smiles. Poppadums and a colourful array of chutneys are spirited to our table.

Rebecca is bemused by the attention. "Where is everybody?"

"I don't know. I've never known it so quiet. I wish it was like this more often."

"Perhaps they're all digging themselves shelters to avoid this asteroid."

"You've read about that? I've only heard snippets. What's the latest?"

"Well, apparently it hits towards the end of the month - the 28th."

"Ah,... yes - though the last I heard it was a couple of weeks and a close pass, rather than a hit."

"Not according to the red-tops this morning,... a blinking bull's eye, apparently. Cheered me up no end."

"Cheered you up? How so?"

"Well, don't you always dread that first day back at work? Worst thing about being a teacher. But this time it looks like we needn't worry. Problem solved. This time there'll be no new term. "

"Ah! Well, don't get your hopes up. I reckon it'll miss us by a several hundred thousand miles. It all depends which newspaper you read."

"I wonder if that's really it? Everyone's staying at home. The hotel's quiet as well - I booked at the last minute and it's usually impossible to get in anywhere - the Lake District seems to fill up solid, months in advance."

"Are you worried?"

"No,... I'm sure, you're right. It's like all those other apocalypses - a mixture of hot air, imagination and wishful thinking. But,... if it was, say, next month - and you knew for certain the world was going to end - because this thing is fifty miles across - and that's what they're talking about here: end of story - what would you do?"

"Fifty miles across? Seriously?"

"Oh yes,... it'll be bigger than the Cambrian event - you know, the one that wiped all those ugly dinosaurs out. Ask me, it did a good job. Yuk!"

"I'm sure some forms of life will survive then,... they did last time."

"Well yes,... but will we be one of them?"

"Strange,... it reminds me of something someone said - a fellow traveller - how she'd never met anyone from a time-line later than mine. I wonder if that's why? I was going to ask around next time I was there and see if I could find someone from my own future."

"You've said so much there I don't understand. Start with Fellow traveller."

I take the journal from my pocket and show her the cover. "Emma Louise Hollander. This is her journal. I came across it yesterday." I'm turning the book thoughtfully now, wondering if I dare let Rebecca touch it, and if I do how that will effect my dreams. I let her hold it anyway.

"She gave you her journal?"

"Not directly,... she passed away some time in the late 1860's, I think. Died of fever in Bombay."

"Ah,... and you met her, when you were dreaming?"

"No, we met before, years ago. I knew her originally as M."

"Ah,... M for muse; I remember you telling me about her. She's the one your wife thought you were shagging."

Blush. "Yes. I don't know why I make the association now, but I do, and I'm running with it. But we met again, after the journal turned up. Yesterday. We talked at length, but it puzzled me, that thing she said, about not knowing anyone in the dream-time from beyond my time. Perhaps we're doomed after all."

"You don't think you're taking the dream too literally do you? I mean, dreams are like that aren't they? Perhaps unconsciously you want the world to end, so that's reflected in your dreams?"

"I know what you mean, and I'm sure you're right, but I don't think I want the world to end. Freud talked about the death instinct being something we all carry, a sort of counterbalance to the instinct for life and survival, and I can go along with it to a degree, but I'm not so,...mean spirited as that."

"But let say we *are* doomed. What would you do?"

"Stock up on supplies and go to the cabin, I suppose."

"Hunker down you mean, hope to escape the worst of it?"

“Far from it - I imagine it would be like a nuclear holocaust, this thing hitting us. In which case your best hope would be to find yourself sitting right underneath it. No, I think I'd just use the time remaining to unwind, let go, think, dream. And hope I get wiped out in the first shockwave. What would you do?"

She ponders this for a moment, perhaps wondering if I'm serious. "I've always wanted to smoke a cigar," she says. "I'd do that,... and perhaps find someone partially sighted enough to overlook my peg leg and give me a quick shag. Apart from that I can't think of anything deep and meaningful I'd want to do - which is strange. You'd think I'd have all sorts of spiritually searching things I'd want to do."

"Such as?"

She gives me a shrug. "Oh, you know: peace with God and all that."

This is interesting, Lewis. I realise there is no peace I need to make. The religious appeal to God for salvation. Me? I'd like to avoid a painful death of course, but beyond that I don't fear passage into the next world - I go there every night - or at least to its hinterlands in the liminal zone of dreams. I'd regret not making sense of this life before I'm due to leave it, but I'm coming to the conclusion we're not really meant to. Perhaps I'm more at peace than I think I am.

I ask her: "Is there no family you'd want to be with?"

"No. Mum and Dad are both gone now - no aunts or uncles or cousins. You?"

"Same."

"What about your ex-wife?"

"Remarried, husband, children. I'd want to say goodbye to her, I think, but,... I probably wouldn't - too weird."

"I agree. Shall we order wine?"

"You have what you want. I don't drink remember, plus I'm driving."

"Okay."

"Not afraid of losing control and allowing yourself to get impregnated?"

"More afraid of losing my virginity actually. I've held onto it for this long, I might as well see it through to the end."

"Unless it turns out the asteroid's going to strike after all."

She smiles. "Yes, in which case I'll let you know."

"I'm flattered."

"Don't be. You know what they say: any port in a storm, Timothy."

The waiter brings us a bottle of wine we might have paid a fiver for in the Co-op. It costs us twenty quid - but he does open the bottle and pour, so I suppose it's money well spent. She raises her glass and we toast to death and virginity.

Other souls have entered the restaurant now, but their conversation is muted and fails to lift the curiously oppressive atmosphere. I wonder again if I'm dreaming and make the usual checks. No, I cannot shape-shift the salt-pot into a banana, nor Rebecca into Rita Hayworth, nor myself into anything or anyone other than what and who I am.

But there remains something dream-like about it all.

Rebecca and I have talked endlessly for hours now, sometimes sparring, sometimes teasing, sometimes - it has to be said - flirting, which I did not expect and must admit I find exciting. It makes me wonder if this side of me is not yet burnt completely out. She would make a sparkling kind of love, I think,... giggling, bright, vital,... fun. The best kind of loving - always supposing I'm remembering it right, for it does seem an awfully long time ago now, and like everything else it's sometimes hard to discern the memory of what is real from what was merely dreamed.

We order two Vindaloos as a mutual dare, and a large jug of water to put out the fire.

Rebecca is studying the diagrams in Emma's journal, tracing her fingertip over the text. "You book-marked this bit?" she says. "Emma's talking about mutual dreaming - do you think she really tried it? I mean,... there's some racy stuff in here for the times."

"Yes, I was reading that part."

"Ever tried it?"

"The mutual dreaming or the racy stuff?"

She gives me a patient look. "The mutual dreaming."

"No, never found anyone with the nerve for it, or the inclination, or the maturity - including me. The main problem with it is believing it’s possible in the first place."

"And you don’t?"

"I’m open to the idea, but it’s proving it that’s the problem. And I need convincing."

"Oh?"

"I might dream of being with you. You might dream of being with me. But unless we exchange stories on waking and find they're the same, how do we know we dreamed the same dream, shared the same dream-time? And no one's ever come up with any convincing data on it."

"You sound like a sceptic now, not a shaman."

"I'm not a shaman,... or a sceptic,... quite,..."

"Then what?"

"I resist it,... the idea,... that's all. It terrifies me if you must know."

Rebecca reads on. "Just as well then, she says you mustn't compare stories. Why does she say that?"

"I don't know. Emma's quite a mystery."

"Well,... we could always break the rules and swap stories anyway?"

"We could, but I think she's implying that's not what the dream-time is for."

"Then what *is* it for?"

"I don't know,... just not *that*. And if we do exchange stories, find out that even though we each dreamed of the other, our dreams were completely different, would that make any difference anyway? Would it disprove the existence of the dreamscape as an objective realm?"

"It would make a difference to me, I think. I'd want to know it was real, and we'd do that by comparing stories of the dream. This curry that's coming, it'll be hot. We both know what *hot* means. We'll both experience its heat. We'll agree on it and say, *that was hot*. What point would there be to a reality in which you remember it as hot, and I remember it as mild, or that you remember we ate Indian, and I remember it as Chinese?"

"But is it really important? What if we were blind? What if we had no concept of Chinese, Indian, hot,... cold?..."

"We'd still have some points of reference, some form of story to compare. He said, she said, they said,..."

"What if we had no concept of language, and could only communicate by touch, or by sensing the emotions of those around us?"

"Are you trying to scare me? It won't work. I spent years in a seminary, before deciding to switch from preaching to teaching. I

covered the whole gamut of non-physical realities, thank you, from the sublime to the frankly ridiculous,... and really,... Tim?... Are you all right? Have I said something?"

My throat is dry suddenly. I pour myself a large glass of water and gulp it down. "Did you just say you attended a seminary?"

"Yes, anything wrong with that?"

"Then,... you were training to be a *priestess*?"

My voice is hoarse and I can barely get the words out.

"That's a very quaint way of putting it," she says. "But, women do become Vicars these days, you know? We're also allowed to vote, and propose marriage - to both men and women, supposedly without raising the eyebrows of crusty old duffers in their club chairs."

"Yes,... I do know that."

"My father was a Churchman,... Vicar of Saint Pauls in Middleton. And I had to find something, after the accident,..."

"But you said you were a convent girl. How does that work? Anglican churchman sends his daughter to a Catholic school for instruction by nuns? And so far as I'm aware Catholics haven't yet admitted women into the priesthood."

She fishes the crucifix from her bosom and twinkles at me. "That would have been an interesting story wouldn't it? Sorry, I said Convent for simplicity. It was a girl's boarding school with a very strong Christian ethos. Not much different to one of those convent schools, I shouldn't imagine. I'm Anglican."

She's morphing, changing before my eyes. The blue pattern of her dress is blurring into a plain blue serge. I see the slit of white at her throat. Rebecca Rayworth. Rita Hayworth. Actress. Teacher. Seminarian. Woman of God!

RBR - the Reverend Becky Rayworth.

Gotcha!

"You didn't qualify?"

"You mean was I ordained?" She shrugs. "I left. Ask me why?"

"Okay, why?"

"Because I thought every line of the Christian liturgy read like it had been written by a committee. It's as inspirational as a plank of wood. It needs a gifted interpreter, and it's not had one of those in two thousand years. Do I believe in God? Yes. But my God has not the face we were shown in that ever so prim and brutally chaste boarding school.

"I remember the showers there were cold and the beds were very hard, and we were told to sleep with our hands crossed on our chests, like this. Make a cross, so if we died in the night, Jesus would know of our belief in Him and be more likely to receive us. But really it was just to stop us from fiddling with ourselves downstairs.

"My God has no face, Timothy. My God is everywhere and nowhere. Do I believe in what I teach? Yes. If you ask me do I believe God thinks it's wrong for a man to marry a man in church, or for a Bishop to be a woman, or for a woman to be in love with a woman and make love to her while wearing a rubber cucumber? I say who cares? I say *An it harm none, do what ye will*, which is from the Wiccan Rede, by the way, and a very sinful thing for a Convent girl to be saying - except it's one of the most beautiful and profoundly meaningful religious texts to be put together in modern times. What? Well, I've clearly shocked you. I do hope this isn't going to change things between us."

"Em,... do you ever regret, not going through with it?"

"Becoming a vicar? Sometimes. I was never under any illusion though. It's hard enough to be a woman vicar, but a reforming one as well? I wouldn't have lasted long, would I? *Sing all things bright and Beautiful, and keep the sermon short*,... that's what my father used to say, at least towards the end of his days. Would you like to see my Celtic tattoo, now?"

Rebecca has a tattoo?

"Slow down, you're confusing me."

She laughs, winks cheekily. "Only joking about the tattoo. I would never have got any work as a dancer with a tattoo. They only want clean skins: long legs. Big tits help too, but not too big. What? Timothy, you're looking at me very strangely."

"Only because I've met that side of you."

She thinks I'm joking. "Long legs and big tits? In your dreams, boy."

"Not the dancer. The vicar. And that's exactly where I've met her, *in my dreams*. She's been flirting with me for a long time. You make a good vicar, Rebecca."

"You say such odd things. I'm sure they make perfect sense to you, but they leave everyone else guessing. It's annoying. Don't blame others for not wanting to understand you if you treat them like you don't expect them to in the first place."

"Do I do that?"

"Yes. But I get it. It's like I said earlier - you no longer care. You've pared the universe of Timothy Magowan down to just one person. The last man standing. It's what I'd like to do as well, except I couldn't bear the loneliness. Solipsism is not joke, Timbo. You think my wanting to dance again is childish?"

"No. I think you'll find the experience exhilarating, healing,.."

"I hope so. There's still a part of me back there, looking at the way I am now and feeling disappointed with the way things have turned out. And why not? She's young, she loved what she did,.... but I could really use her energy these days. That's why I want to go back, to dance, to find her again, in my dreams, hopefully bring her back with me."

"There's no reason why you won't. I can teach you. You might be lucky and score first time, or it might a week or so, but you'll get there."

"But once I'm *in* there, in the dream-scape, I'm on my own, aren't I? Alone in the universe of Becca Rayworth."

"No need to be afraid of that. You'll find your way. Everyone does. The hardest thing is getting in there in the first place. There's a technique, and I can teach you that."

She taps the pages of Emma's journal. "You wouldn't recommend we try this then?"

"Mutual dreaming?" I realise I'm smiling, like the worst of the sceptics. "Like I said, I'm not sure it's possible. Emma doesn't actually say it is - just outlines the techniques for trying it. We might spend years on it and not get anywhere. We'd be better concentrating on the basics, letting go of the day's anxieties, entering the dream space in a serene frame of mind,... that sort of thing. Do you meditate?"

She nods. "But Emma wouldn't write it down if it wasn't true."

"I'm not saying she didn't think it was true, only that we don't know if she managed it. She might have done - I haven't read all of the journal."

Rebecca hands the journal back, passes it carefully. "Strange, this woman died a hundred and fifty years ago, but we're talking about her like she's still alive."

"Well,... she is. I talked with her just last night, and she seemed very much alive to me."

"But there you are. What was that experience if it wasn't a

shared mutual dream?"

"It's different, I think."

"Because she's dead? But you just told me she wasn't."

Rebecca is right in this of course. I have walked and talked with many in the dreaming and treated them as both what and whom they appeared to be. But to make a dream companion of someone you know in waking life?... that seems a little dangerous. We do all sorts of things in dreams, reveal all sorts of traits that are better left hidden. Perhaps that's why Emma counsels against discussing the experience afterwards. You leave it vague, cover your indiscretions with a veil of uncertainty.

Rebecca reads my silence as reluctance, pouts beautifully. "You won't come in with me, then?"

"It's not that I won't, Rebecca. It's more that I don't know how. I've never done it. Lucid dreaming is one thing - with a bit of patience and practice anyone is capable of doing it."

But she's persistent, and persuasive, trying every button I possess - compassion, flattery, sympathy, politeness: "I'm just thinking I'll be so shocked to find myself lucid in my dreams, I'll wake myself back up again. I'll get nowhere at all with it. It would be so much better if you came with me, gave me something to hold onto, inside the dream. I mean it's not exactly like you're busy, is it. You'll be sleeping, after all."

"But we're talking about *shared* lucid dreaming, Rebecca. That's very advanced, if it's possible at all. The Sufis claim to be able to do it, and they also teach it in the Tibetan Buddhist tradition. But I have no knowledge of it. I wouldn't know where to start. It would be like trying to run before we can walk."

"But you're forgetting, you have Emma's journal. She can be our teacher. Don't you think it's fated it should only turn up only yesterday, at a time when this is precisely the knowledge we're seeking?"

"Correction:*You're* seeking."

"All right. *I'm* seeking."

"And have you read that bit of her journal *clearly*, Rebecca? We'd have to spend time together, develop the kind of connection known only to people who have been married for a long time."

"So?"

"*And* we'd have to *sleep* together. Which would mean no sleep, because I've not slept with anyone in over a decade, and from what

you say you've never slept with anyone at all. And believe me just *sleeping* with someone takes some getting used to."

"So, is that a yes, or a no?"

"Rebecca, please,... "

"What are you afraid of?"

Afraid? Well, what is it Timothy?

You have found your high priestess. She is the Reverend Becca Rayworth.

And she wants to sleep with you.

Chapter 17

There's an art-house cinema in Ambleside these days. I note they are screening Gilda. I'm not surprised by this. It was perhaps Rita Hayworth's most famous role, and certainly the one I most identify her with. Sometimes the universe can be infuriating with its taunts, but who am I to judge? Do I think I can ignore the call? Of course I can't - its understanding what it means that's always been my trouble.

I'm walking with Rebecca, who is now a full bottle of strong wine the worse for wear. She's mostly coherent, but taking more care with her steps than usual. She has one arm tucked into mine for additional steadiness as we make our way across town. I find her trust in me deeply moving. No one has been this physically close to me since I was married. But I am determined we shall not sleep together.

Don't get me wrong here, Lewis, we are not talking about, *ugh*, sex, but simply lying down together in the same bed and going to sleep. Still, I'm finding there's something indecent in its chaste utility, and there has to be another way because, to be frank, I don't know her well enough to expose her to my bedroom habits. You know what I mean, my friend? In bed, we do not simply sleep. We also snore, we grind our teeth, and we fart.

However, I'm thinking if I can get her going with lucid dreaming on her own, she'll be so blown away by it, she'll forget she ever asked about the other bit - which seems too much of a distraction to be worth the risk.

I pause by the publicity poster for Gilda, admiring the 40's noir design. Should we go in and watch? No, the last thing Rebecca wants is to extend the evening any further. What she really wants, or needs, is somewhere steady to lie down and sleep that bottle of cheap wine off.

I trust she has some Aspirins in her luggage.

"I've not been to the cinema since I was a girl," she says.

"Oh? What was the last film you saw?"

She thinks. "It must have been Grease. God, how old does that make me? What about you?"

"Me? Em,... I'm forty nine."

"No,... *film*, you idiot. What was the last film you saw? But

thanks for that little snippet anyway. I'll file it for later. Forty nine? Is that all - you look so much older."

"Ha! Thanks. Actually, I go to the cinema a lot. Most will tell you it's no fun being a singleton, but it's all a question of confidence and perspective. I quite like it."

"I know you don't mean any of that, except perhaps the bit about going to the pictures a lot on your own. Don't tell me: you like action blockbusters with lots of guns and fast cars and women with big boobies?"

"You know, you're hilarious when you're drunk. No, I never watch a film if there's a gun in the blurb, or fast cars or a pair of big boobies."

"You can't possibly get to the cinema very often then. So what films do you like? You're not a Jane Austen fan, are you - all that dressing up nonsense?"

"I am actually. What's wrong with costume drama?"

"Ew,.. a bit *girlie*, don't you think? Now I think I know where Emma comes from. Shall we go in? We'll just catch the last showing."

"No need. I can tell you the plot. Boy met girl before, but they've broken up, and she's married his new found and slightly sinister benefactor. They meet, and hate and love and hate and love each other all the way through the film."

"Does the sinister benefactor get killed so they can get married in the end and live happily ever after?"

"That's about it. So you *have* seen Gilda?"

"No, but I think I'd like to see it, if you're not too tired."

"You don't need to see it. You're already in it."

She narrows her eyes and feigns indignation, stamps her foot petulantly - the foot of her bad leg, I note. "Explain that remark, Magowan," she demands. "or you'll have the sharp end of my tongue."

When we enter the cinema, Gilda is on my arm, and I would be conscious of it, thinking everyone should be looking up in astonishment, except, as at the restaurant, the cinema is empty. There is only the cashier, who doesn't seem to notice the resemblance and is just relieved someone has turned up this evening. Thus, we take our places in the seductively plush red house of dreaming, and the credits roll.

Rebecca is asleep in minutes, head lolling, snoring softly. I feel a

volcano erupting inside, shaking me. What the hell is that? Oh, wait, I remember? It's amusement, happiness,... I'm *laughing*.

Take a breath, Timothy. Settle back. Enjoy this moment. It's proving to be a crazy evening. Just when you think your life revolves around the petty plot of Strickland's suits, it veers wildly into the long grass.

Rita Hayworth. Rebecca Rayworth. The Reverend Becky.

Three in one.

A holy trinity?

I wonder if she dreams of me.

Then I'm thinking: why Gilda? Film noir? Femme fatale? Love and hate entwined around the blade of a sword, neither aware of how deeply each cuts the other. Tempestuous. Dangerous. Gilda. Larger than life. But none of this is relevant at all, and of course there are times when any kind of thinking can only take you further from the stillness required to really make sense of things.

Wait, what was it Rita Hayworth said about the men in her life? *"They go to bed with Gilda, but they wake up with me?"*

Men courted a fantasy in her, made love to it, fell asleep with it, and woke up with the reality of Rita - not a dream, but a woman - still a beautiful woman, but not Gilda, not the fantasy. Go to bed with Gilda and wake up with who? Rebecca? The *real* Rebecca? Go to bed?

Or go to sleep?

How tired are you, Timothy? Do you think you could sleep? Catch up with Rebecca in the dream-time?

Here?

Go on, mate. It's worth a shot.

I set the timer on my watch for an hour.

The movie opens.

"Are you decent Gilda?"

Gilda makes her entrance, even as she sleeps beside me. I close my eyes, but fear to let go,... so I release my girls, my *Dakinis*, and they spread themselves among the empty seats, and in the aisle - weapons glinting, sharp eyes watchful, infusing my being with calm.

Then I hear a voice. "You've missed the best bit."

I'm thinking I've nodded off, that Rebecca is now awake, teasing me, snatching me back to reality, but Rebecca is still asleep, still purring.

It's Emma.

She's sitting on the other side of me, eating popcorn.

"What do you mean, the best bit?"

One of my girls shushes us, Emma lowers her voice in respect. "Your favourite part - the one where she's dancing, and stripping in the club in front of all those silly men, just to get Johnny's back up."

"You mean the bit where she takes her gloves off? No, that's not my favourite bit."

"I know." She sighs. "You didn't really think it would work did you?"

"Shared dreaming with Rebecca? No. But it was worth a try. Easier than actually laying down together on a bed and following your procedure to the letter. And less embarrassing."

"Are you disappointed?"

"No, like I said, I didn't think it would work. And in spite of what she was saying earlier, I don't think she really meant it either."

"Oh, she meant it. Some things we can only admit to when we're drunk. She trusts you, Timothy. If you knew her better you'd understand how much."

"But that's just it - we hardly know each other."

"Then you have the measure of how much she also trusts her instincts about you."

"Does she dream of me, now?"

"We'll never know, and neither will she - not on that much wine. Oh, she's away with the fairies all right, but she won't remember. You must be gentle when she wakes and see her safely home - walk her to her door. That's the best we can do for her tonight. I know,... you were going to do all of that anyway. You must let her in Timothy."

"Into her room?"

"Into the dreaming. Go with her. Say "yes" to her. Whatever she asks of you, say *yes*. She will not abuse it, she will not turn your story into a pornographic fantasy."

"But you can't share a dream, can you?"

"You must have thought it a possibility, or you wouldn't be trying it now. Only you woke up with me again. Not her. Or are we not sharing this moment?"

"That's impossible to know for certain. Unless,... Rita Hayworth said *they go to bed with Gilda but wake up with me*,.."

Emma smiles. "So you know that sometimes the signposts aren't

important in themselves. We do not find our destination in the signpost, but in the direction the signpost is pointing."

"I'm definitely not going to bed with Gilda."

"You mean Rebecca."

"I mean *Rebecca*."

"Is it that you're afraid of falling in love? Too late for that; you're already in love with Rebecca. Are you afraid of the long shadow of the long term, as Raul so eloquently puts it?" She shakes her head. "Have you not thought there may be no long term. This is yet to dawn upon you. But it's creeping up, Timothy. And what then?"

"What do you mean no long term?"

She reaches across, pinches my arm. "Wakey, wakey."

"Ouch!"

Rebecca is poking my arm. "Charming date you turned out to be. Ten minutes and you're asleep."

The end credits are rolling. My watch bleeps unhelpfully.

"I'm sorry, Rebecca. I don't know what happened there."

"It's all right. Shall we go? I need the toilet first, or I'm going to explode. I never could hold my drink."

"Okay."

I wait in the lobby, while Rebecca visits the bathroom. I sit on the sofa and sink my head into my hands, trying to shake off the twin feelings of doom and urgency - urgency, to conclude whatever business I have with Rebecca - and if it's to sleep with her, we'd better be getting on with it because there isn't much time. And yes, I'm talking *sex* now. And then I'm wondering what the hell I'm going on about, wondering if I'm completely unhinged, that one night out with an amiable woman can possibly do all this,... to totally unbalance me.

Time is irrelevant, whether we have an hour left, or a lifetime, Timothy.

Emma?

Rebecca reappears, stealing up on me, trying to catch me off guard. She's intrigued by what she sees: "Is it as bad as that?"

"What?"

"Your face."

"My face?"

"Last time I saw one like that was on a fishmonger's slab."

"Ah,... right. Thanks. I,... I was thinking about the film, that's all. I just never knew what she saw in him."

"Who saw what in whom?"

"Gilda,... in Johnny. Johnny was a possessive, jealous and vindictive ass all the way through, and I wasn't fooled by his last minute reformation into a gentleman. As soon as the camera stops rolling, he'll start treating her badly again. And she knows it."

"Yes,... and you'd think she'd be getting tired of it by now because they've been at it for seventy years. Perhaps they deserve each other."

"Sorry. Like you said, my words don't always make sense when they come out."

"I know. But there's no need to apologise. I'm not looking for a faithful puppy dog in you. And I like it that you can think out loud with me - it makes a change to feel trusted in that way. It seems we have potential, Timothy."

She's still tipsy, in an amorous way, revealing more of herself than I'm comfortable with. I do not want this. I do not want her, like this. And I don't care what Emma says. I am not in love with her.

It's raining when we reach the street. It's dark and the air is cool. We both lift our faces to it and breathe the freshness. I smell sweet wood-smoke, and chips, and curry.

"I don't look anything like Gilda," she says. "Gilda must be a foot taller for a start." She squeezes my arm, and I realise we have linked up again. "But thanks for the compliment."

"Gilda was a dancer too, like you. And Rita Hayworth was a dancer in real life. Did you know Fred Astaire once said she was the best dancer he'd ever partnered?"

"Really? One of my heroes, Fred Astaire. I watch him endlessly on You Tube - such grace, such humour, to say nothing of being a genius at choreography. But unlike me, Gilda became a gold digger, trading off her looks, a woman who married a man the day after meeting him. Not like me. Also, she wasn't a teacher. And she wasn't very smart, or she'd never have looked twice at a pillock like Johnny."

"Nor was she a former seminarian."

She chuckles. "That really freaks you out, doesn't it?"

"Yes,.. a bit."

Is that why I cannot fall in love with her? But why not Timothy?

We're walking now. Rebecca is leaning into me for support, while tapping at the pavement with her cane, every other step

swaying into me. We find a rhythm. Slow, mindful,... meditative. It feels good. It comes to me through my legs, a rising tingling sensation, an energy that fizzes like bubbles in sparkling water. This time last week I'd not looked twice at the dowdy Ms Rayworth, hobbling in and out of her classroom. Now I cannot bear to let her go.

Emma is right: I am in love with her.

No, just lonely.

We pause by the car and she smiles, pulls off her glasses and wipes the speckles of rain from them with a tissue.

"If Strickland could see us now?" she says.

"That name again! What about him?"

"Aren't there rules about members of staff being seen out together, in flagrante, walking at midnight in the rain?"

"No, it's non his business what we get up to. And we're hardly in flagrante."

She winks at me playfully. "Oh really?"

"And it's not midnight. It's just going up for eleven."

She feigns exasperation: "Pedant! You English teachers are all the same. Oh, yes - you know what I mean. I could give you a copy of The Prelude, and you'd be scanning it for grammar and spelling."

"Not true. Well,... perhaps a bit. But there are no rules, Rebecca. Only those we make up in our heads."

"Like?"

"Like how we relate to people. And how we don't or shouldn't, when really we should."

"Are you thinking out loud again? Only this is the time for a little more coherence, you know? Like when you're actually talking *to* someone."

What is this, Timothy? What ails you man? The coming weeks are going to feel so empty after this evening. That's why I want to ask if I can see her again, if I can see her *tomorrow* actually, even though I know I should just let her go.

I try a clumsy change of subject: "What if this asteroid,... you know?..."

Exasperation again, but this time, not so feigned. "You've already told me you'd want to hide away on your mountain top, and pray you were sitting right under it when it hit."

"I did?"

"Pretty much."

"Well, would it be wrong to be so,... resigned to it, so passive?"

"Not wrong Johnny. You're just tired of running."

"Did you just call me Johnny?"

"Yes, Johnny. *Johnny. Such an easy name to forget.*" She laughs at her impersonation of Gilda. Then she lays her head against my heart, and my heart stops. Why is she doing this? It makes me want to enfold her.

Then do it, Timothy.

"Are you all right?" I ask.

She nods. "Slightly drunk. Just let me have this moment, Johnny." And then: "Listen," she says - and her voice is suddenly full of sleep. "It's what we're expected to do. All our lives, Johnny. Do as you're told, Johnny. Conform. Wear the suit, Johnny." She looks up at me, something defiant in her eyes."Well, I say enough. I say bring it on, Johnny. I say we're more likely to discover the meaning of life in five fucking minutes, if we know five f,..ucking minutes is all we've got."

"That sounds like the Reverend Becky Rayworth talking. Except for the bad language."

She pats my chest a playfully. "Damned right it is. But here endeth the lesson. Now, I'm wet and cold, and I want a hot bath, and bed!"

I give her a formal bow. "Then allow me to escort you to you hotel, Vicar."

She curtseys. "Thank you, my son. You may deliver me to the lobby of the Albion Hotel."

"I shall deliver you to your door, then say goodnight."

She's looking at me now as if I had fed her the line on purpose. *And if I didn't want to say goodnight?*

Go with the tingling in your legs, Timothy.

Chapter 18

A sunny terrace, Ambleside, by the shimmering shore of Lake Windermere. The scent of freshly planed wood rises from the deck. There is a creamy and gloriously aromatic cappuccino at my elbow, chocolate sprinkles lying in a frozen spiral on the froth. The water of the lake is oily black and sluggish in its lapping against the pilings, and it matches perfectly the rhythm of my breaths. Morning sunbeams sparkle on the surface, stabbing at my eyes until I raise my shades and the morning takes on a more comfortable sepia.

Anyone would think it had been me drinking last night.

Last night?

What happened last night?

It's odd but, for now at least, I have no recollection of anything beyond the picture house. Did Rebecca get home all right? How did we part? Did she invite me into her room?

Think, Timothy! What is this?

Are you going senile?

There's a newspaper on the table, borrowed from the rack, for customers to idle over. I would not usually take a paper, especially not a sleazy big-tit red-top like this one and I wonder what made me choose it? Who has the highbrow news then? Where is the intelligent analysis to be had these days? And why am I always left feeling assaulted by this emotive dross?

Headline, front page: Teacher downloads porn.

Ouch!

Oh, for heaven's sake!

They're still after the poor man then, though how they managed to get hold of his browsing details smacks of server-side corruption - that while they're after his balls, others should be after their heads. Information is power, and information is always for sale.

I too am a teacher, have already confessed to looking at pornography. But only to you Lewis. You may use the information how you will, but I refuse to accept the mantle of depravity. I am a man, and there are certain things I'm driven to feel from time to time. It's only now I can't remember what those things are - just as I can't remember what Rebecca and I did last night.

Onanism.

Pardon?

Posh word, meaning masturbation. Let's have out with it, you sneak creeping bastard: *Wanking*. It's like sticking your finger up your nose or scratching your arse. We all do it, while pretending to others that we don't. Does it make me unsuitable as a teacher? Is that why they confiscate my telephone every morning?

Have you already grassed me up, Lewis?

But what is Rebecca's crime?

I think of her lying in her boarding school dormitory, arms crossed chastely upon her chest. And I wonder,... did she *ever*?... well, of course she did. And do you know about that too?

This isn't helping, Timothy.

Neither is the fact that, in case you hadn't noticed, sitting across the table from you is Janice Iddon.

What the f,...?

Yes,... and more, she's looking alarmingly attractive, and refreshingly un-sweaty in a crisp white blouse and a very short skirt. Short? Well,.... let's just say it's a good job she has her legs crossed. Careful what you write now, this girl is seriously under-age, and Lewis is most definitely *not* to be trusted.

She's reading Catcher in the Rye.

I'm struck by this because isn't she supposed to be reading Mice and Men? Steinbeck? Salinger? I don't suppose it matters. I mean, what I really want her to be reading is Orwell and Zola, but I'm too old to be fixing the corporate excesses of the world; my time is over, I've failed. Indeed Globacorp will shortly be having the coat from my back, literally - but maybe Janice could make a difference, make a name for herself in the decimated ranks of theTrades Union Movement, rather than Globacorp Human Resources department, thus uniting us all in a common purpose against exploitation, rather than adding her intellectual energy to the infernal machine that divides us into suits and non-suits - that Globacorp might then more easily exploit us.

High horse, Timothy. Come down, man.

Pause for breath.

Better now.

What the hell happened last night?

"Your coffee's going cold Mr. Magowan."

"Ah,... yes,.. thank you, Janice."

"Do you think they'll find us here?"

"I'm sorry,... who?"

"You know,... *them*."

What's this? Have I kidnapped her?

Janice smiles. "I know they won't understand, but I don't care. I'll always love you Mr. Magowan." Her voice is lyrical, sweet,... lovely.

"Em,... well,... that's very nice of you." I feel a rush in my chest, a flowering of inappropriate joy and compassion and,.. "I love you too, Janice, very much. But you know I can't give you any babies."

Did I really just say that?

She looks up from her book, something pointed in her expression now, and her voice is not so sweet as before. "You *can't*?"

"No."

"But,... I want your *babies* Mr Magowan. I *want* them!"

Ah. There's a look of disappointment about her now and a petulance in her tone. Poor Janice; I seem to have misjudged her. She'll have babies with anyone, so what use is literature to her? She'll be four kids the worse by the time she's twenty five, and struggling on minimum wage like the rest of the non-suits, renting a hovel from a slum-landlord, because even a front door of her own will be beyond her reach. And I'm just realising now that I'm dreaming all of this, which is a tremendous relief because for a moment there,...

She had me *really, really* worried.

"Anyway Janice, it's been lovely talking to you. And quite a nice surprise. I'll see you again,... after the holidays, all right?"

"Yes, Mr. Magowan." She casts me a sulky look. "Are you sure I can't have your babies?"

"Quite sure. Now, don't forget to read your Mice and Men. And if you do forget, or you struggle in any way with it, don't worry - all the relevant analysis is to be found online, along with the required essays, no doubt - just be intelligent in your plagiarisation."

"Thank you Mr. Magowan. I promise."

Close your eyes, Timothy. Now wake damn you.

No,... the dream is tenacious. I need it to push me out somehow, but at least when I open my eyes now, Janice has gone and spared me the spectacle of her short skirt, to say nothing of a very womanly bosom - which I suspect the dream was exaggerating. Her book lies on top of the newspaper. It still irks me, so I change it by power of imagination to a copy of The Road to Wigan Pier. There, I feel more at home, now. Then I note the newspaper headline has

changed to: "Stock market fears over asteroid impact."

Ah,... I'd been asking for that, but never mind it now: *think Timothy. What happened last night?*

I remember it was going up for midnight, still raining a little. I remember the crackle and ping of gravel under the tyres as we pulled up outside the Albion. She touched my arm in parting, and I watched her go in alone. Safer that way, I'm thinking. Then I'm thinking I'm a coward as I drive away, and I hate myself. And I want to turn around, run after her, ask her if we can see each other again, but it's too late for that now - I'd just look stupid, and at forty nine years old, all tweed jacketed and staid and pedantic, I should really know better.

Is that what the dream of Janice Iddon was about? Was my dream guide, my personal picture house projectionist, teasing me, telling me an impressionable young girl is about my level - that real women, women like Rebecca Rayworth will be forever out of my league?

"Don't be silly," says Emma.

What?

Emma is leaning over the handrail, looking down into the water, a dainty parasol keeping the sun from her head. "How old were you when you first started taking notice of girls? And I'll wager the girls looked pretty much like Janice did just now. Part of you is still a child, Timothy. That's all. Get over it."

"Thanks."

"I did not mean it as an insult. Think harder."

"About Janice?"

"No,... about *Rebecca*."

"You mean literally? Or?..."

"Literally yes,... think, man."

"I'm,... outside Rebecca's door." *So, I did walk her in after all!*

Emma twinkles in approval. "Now what else."

"Rebecca's close, leaning close, touching my arm,... we're almost embracing, and she's saying,... what? How much she hates me? *'I hate you Johnny,... I hate you so much I could die from it,...'* No, that's what Gilda says to *her* Johnny. It's a line from the film. Rebecca doesn't hate me,... what does she say?"

Stop, Tim. In the dreaming all things can be true.

"Pinch me Emma? Please. Get me out of here."

She laughs, sits at the table where Janice had been sitting a

moment ago. Then she pulls out a long hat pin and makes to stab my hand with it. She doesn't really mean to do it, I hope, but there's a glimmer of something in her eye that makes me snatch my hand back in alarm.

Huh!....

Awake now.

I think.

Safely, and surely awake. Properly this time. Never had a false awakening, Lewis? They can be scary. I get them all the time. Anyway, where are we?

Soft light, the scent of pine and rosemary. Chanel? No,... I'm at the cabin, alone.

What happened last night?

Deep breath! I let the possibilities swirl and settle, let them fix themselves from the endless truths of the dreaming into my more mundane working, waking reality. Finally the memory rises as the post sleep stupor fades. Rebecca and I shared a quick and rather self conscious hug on the landing, outside her door. Then we shook hands.

How charming!

"I'm checking out tomorrow," she says.

"Going home?" I try not to sound disappointed.

"No,... I thought I'd take Rosy for a tour of the Lakes."

"Sounds great." Awkward pause, and then: "Perhaps,..."

An expectant look: "Perhaps?"

Casual shrug: "We could meet up again. I'll be here all summer."

No big deal, Rebecca. It would be nice to see you again, that's all.

Rebecca peels back the layers, reads the unspoken words written there, and smiles. There is a hint of triumph in it, I think. Perhaps I'm fooling myself, but I have a strange tingly feeling this woman wants to be with me, and it's sufficiently rare these days for me to take notice of it.

"That would be ever so nice," she says.

"And,.. if you should struggle,.. I mean,... to find a campsite for Rosy,..."

"Yes?..."

"You can always bring her up to the cabin for a bit. There's plenty of room, and it's quite nice up there."

She takes a breath, nods, is grateful for something I am not yet aware of conceding. "Thank you, Timothy. *Thank you.*"

"It's no problem."

I realise we are no longing shaking hands, but have settled them palm against palm, very still now, something warm and tingling swirling at the point of contact. We wake up to the fact simultaneously, let go awkwardly, smile.

No problem, I'd said. But it is. A problem, I mean. I may be inflating things out of all proportion but right now I'm thinking Rebecca is the biggest problem I've ever faced, and certainly the biggest test of my wits. Or is it more that I am afraid of how she takes me seriously, afraid that if I am to get any closer to her, I shall have to take myself more seriously as well? Such a thing will need a transformation of the psyche I'm not sure I'm capable of.

What am I talking about here, Lewis? Okay, listen: the old school mystics say that when a man receives the call to shamanise, he must answer it or die. Loosely translated this means he must make sense of the energies moving within him and direct them wisely back out into the physical world, or they will tear him apart. He has to ride them, or be crushed under their stampeding hooves. He must relax into the inundation, the psychical flood that is to come, then he might float and rise with it,... or he can resist it and drown.

Mixed metaphors, I'm sorry, but what I'm saying cannot be put precisely into words.

Anyway,...

I draw Rebecca a map in smudgy fountain pen, on a faded till receipt - which is the only thing I can find in my pocket to write upon. It's not easy to find the cabin, but I don't tell her this. Nor do I mention the mile of single track road that zig-zags upwards at a gradient of one in five through a half dozen tyre scuffing hair-pins, nor the dirt track after that, before reaching my Lost World, my private Arcadia.

She'll need pluck and confidence if she's to make it.

I let the fates decide, and bid her goodnight.

Chapter 19

Tai Chi, by the tarn. The morning is still and grey and cool. Patterns of grey and white are reflected in the waters, dancing in kaleidoscopic union with the glazed triangular gable of the cabin. I'm now sensing a withdrawal in myself, like resignation towards an approaching end, like the death of a relative - a thing expected, even anticipated, and with it the knowledge it must be dealt with emotionally at some point in advance. And again it's like the onset of middle age, the feeling of one's uselessness, one's inability to make a difference in the world, and the only consolation is that it doesn't really matter any more.

Defeat or enlightenment?

We take our choice.

I can feel the energy in my body today. Usually it's just the hands, the arms, and a little way into the shoulders, a kind of warm tingling. But this morning it resonates throughout my being, into my chest, down through my loins and my legs. I fancy I can even feel the earth humming through the soles of my feet. I break into Kung Fu, moving the energy, taking it in and sending it out with little punches and kicks. I'm slaying imaginary foes now, knocking them senseless, dislocating arms and legs.

What is this?

Who are they, Timothy?

Why do they disturb you here?

I'm thinking of Strickland and his possible new deputy, Lister. They are predictable enough as foes, if a little childish. And they'll be a devil to deal with next term, since Raul and I are probably for the inquisition over our questionable dress sense and strictly incorporate opinions. *Incorporate? Is that a word? You know what I mean, Lewis.*

Then I fancy I see all those nameless men who have abused Amelia Grey on account of her sensuality and her catwalk model moves - then all the men who will abuse Janice Iddon. And the men who thought it merely in the normal run of things to torture Raul. And then, troubling thought, unbidden: who has tortured Rebecca?

I'm fighting ignorance and cruelty.

Defender of compassion.

Timbo Magaowan to the rescue!

Wait, do you make the mistake of thinking yourself the only perfect man in the world, Timothy? Like in the dream-time, all of these foes are pieces of your own soul and you deny them at your peril.

Fighting myself then?

Stop it Tim, you'll only wear yourself out.

And for what purpose?

Calmer now. Qigong again. Wide stance, deep breaths, from the dantien. The energy pulses and surges. My arms are open, and as I hold them I see Rita Hayworth, arms out like that, hips shimmying as she sings - her legs darting in and out of the cover of her gown. Teasing, tempting. Such beauty! I'm so glad I saw that film last night! Wait! Did I see it? How could I when I was sleeping? Then I saw it in my dreams, with Emma.

Rita! She brings a smile to my face, now. Or is it Rebecca I'm thinking of? Is it Rebecca I see dancing?

You're thinking, Timothy!

You're not supposed to be thinking.

I hear it - an old air-cooler, dropping down into second gear, then first, as it takes the hill. She's coming. How does she manage so clunky a vehicle, and with so deft a touch, with one leg that's no good?

Rosy, an inappropriately pea green bay windowed Volkswagen camper, '68 vintage, rattles into view, taking it slow. It pulls in neatly alongside the Volvo and Rebecca steps down, unhurried, unruffled. She's wearing blue-jeans and a soft, pink sweater. Her hair is brushed and long and shining and there's a steely glint in her eye. She's a little cross no doubt because I did not warn her about the track. She must have thought she was climbing to the edge of the world, risking life and limb on those turns. But she kept going. This woman means business!

She threatens to change you Tim.

Can you handle that?

She waves. "Surprise?"

Yes, Lewis, there's a question mark in it.

It's strange. I've never been here with anyone else, not since Miranda. And she hated it. I have an image of her by the tarn, wrapped in three sweaters, shivering, an iced wind plucking at her hair, making her scowl. The weather was never kind to her; it was always raining here, as if she invited inclemency by her

expectations. And she always seemed fated to have her period - heavy periods too, twice a month, debilitating, unable to travel anywhere without advanced knowledge of the public lavatories en-route.

I wonder how she's managing now.

"Glad you could make it."

"You didn't expect me to, did you?"

"I wondered."

She laughs, does not bear me a grudge that I failed to mention the perilous approach to the cabin. "Bastard," she says. "Am I all right parking there?"

"Sure, or you can move Rosy out by the tarn. The view's better."

"But won't that be spoiling your view from the cabin?"

"No,... she looks like she can blend in pretty well. Plus it'll remind me you're here, and why."

"Oh,... and why am I here?"

"Well, it's not for the camping, is it?"

"It isn't?"

Fantasy, Lewis.

We use it to colour our lives, and very convincing it can be too. Rebecca is playing it down now, but she's also sober. I invited her to camp, so she's here, the very next morning, and just an hour after checking out of the Albion. She drove straight here, yet acts as if it were nothing. It seems you are very much on her mind, Timothy.

"Would you like to see inside?"

"All right. But I've not caught you out or anything? The place looking like a bomb-site? I mean, I know it's a bit early."

I think of you, Lewis, and decide I might have to consider redacting the word *bomb* from later drafts - but decide against it. I worry too about the word redact, decide that I will have to r*e*d*a*c*t that too in some way.

So, you want Rebecca Rayworth? Then you shall have her. I'll shall give her to you with both barrels. Think you're man/woman/machine enough?

"Not at all,... come in. I'll make some,... tea."

"Okay, thanks. What were you doing just now, by the tarn? I saw you through the trees as I came up. It looked like you were dancing."

"That was probably Tai Chi, or Qigong. I find it's very,... calming. I do an hour in the morning, then again in the evening."

"Doctor's orders?"

I laugh. "No. I've not seen a doctor in twenty years. The doctor would think I'm nuts."

"That makes two of us then."

"Thanks."

"No,.. I mean,... the doctor thinks I'm nuts as well. I think you're nuts too, but in a good way. Is that what Raul says you have a black belt in?"

"Raul talks too much, but I'm glad he's on my side. No, they don't give belts for Tai Chi."

Rebecca is in my living room now; the scent of her invading it; her figure is silhouetted against the glass, as she looks out at the tarn, and at the pale russet fells beyond. There is always something auspicious when a woman enters a man's house.

The sun catches the fells, turns them golden for a moment as it probes northwards. I've never seen her in jeans before, only shapeless dresses. She has a good figure - not pulled out of shape, nor droopy from childbearing. And her sweater is a snug fit to that ample bosom which a no doubt substantial bra has managed even to render perky. Her hair is brushed and glowing and impossibly voluminous, and there's the sheen of a dark gloss about her cupid's bow lips too. I wonder if she deliberately set out to create this impression on me, this impression of an attractive, desirable woman.

Because you did not see her like this yesterday, Tim?

So what's changed?

"It's lovely," she's saying. "Plain, and uncluttered, but comfortable. I like it."

She likes it. This is good.

"The furniture - is that your wife's influence?"

Mention of my wife somehow contaminates the fantasy of the moment. I roll with it. "No, the cabin was my aunt's, originally. I've not changed things much. Just the sofa and chairs - they wore out."

"What did she do?"

"My aunt? Teacher at a private school. Music."

"Never married?"

"No."

"Ah, traditional teacher. Married to her work. I see where you get it from."

A hint of sarcasm perhaps, but I was once what in olden times

would have been called a career teacher, before the suits took my phone and my pride away. "It's true I inherited her traditional values, but the profession isn't worth being married to any more."

"Is any? We're all outsiders now, Tim, unless we're accountants or chair moisteners poring over tick sheets. I'm sure your aunt spoiled you rotten."

"Yes,... yes she did."

I show her the small kitchen-diner to the rear, with its view of the forest, and then I show her the bathroom to the side, before realising how stupid it is, to show a visitor one's bathroom. "Quite modern," she says. A smile dances in the corners of her eyes as she reads my embarrassment.

"Modern, yes. But you sound surprised. I told you Raul's never been up here. He's no idea what it's like, but the legend is everything to Raul, and my legend is,... primitive monasticism. Not eco-chic."

She laughs. "I would have thought country chic, and cricket and frothy pints of locally brewed beer were more your style - I mean to look at you."

"Country chic? Really?"

"Sure, what's upstairs?"

"There's a small shower-room on the landing, and two bedrooms either side. One faces east, the other west."

"Which is yours?"

"East facing."

She looks over to the stairs. "Can I see? Or are you afraid I'll contaminate your dreams?"

"Come on up. I thought that was the idea anyway."

"Oh? What idea was that then?"

"That we share our dreams. That we *sleep* together."

She's looking at me now, reading something new in me, wondering if I mean what I appear to be suggesting, or if I've just committed an overly revealing Freudian slip. But I assure you, Lewis, it was quite deliberate. And yes, I do mean to frighten her.

She swallows with difficulty. "And you're,... okay with that?"

She was okay with it yesterday, when drunk. Today, sober, I see it's a different matter, but it still means something to her. She's determined then, just not quite so uninhibited any more.

"Yes,... absolutely. But, I'm still not convinced it'll work. Like I said, sleeping with someone can take a bit of getting used to. You'll

most probably spend a sleepless night frozen stiff because I hog the duvet, and come morning you'll be accusing me of snoring like a buzzsaw and farting like a trooper."

Too much, Timothy; see that flicker of recognition in her eyes: she's onto you now. She lets slip a sly smile: "Oh,... I get it."

Unfortunately she does; I was never any good at bluffing with an empty hand. "What do you mean?"

"You're thinking you can put me off by being so 'up-front' and cool about it. Well if I can drive Rosy up a one in five, half way into the clouds, and no idea if I've taken a wrong turn or not, I can spend a night in a bed with you, and put up with any unfortunate habits you might have."

A bold come back! Strange then that neither of us of mean what we appear to be saying,... at least I hope we don't mean it. No, Lewis, we are not talking about sleeping together - even though we appear to be. Your text parsers are probably struggling with the subtleties of this.

I note she's blushing slightly, and I'm relieved by it. Her propensity for combative thrusts have taken her beyond where she wants to be. Time for me to drive home the coup de grace then. "Sorry I was so sensitive about it before. I have some very chaste pyjamas which cover every part of me, so it would be no more racy than us both nodding off in the cinema, like we did last night."

Ah! Now I sense she's spied a way out. I was never any good at chess - could never think far enough ahead. "I like the sound of your pyjamas," she says. "Blue and white striped Winsiette, by any chance?"

"More beige really."

"Hmm, lovely. I prefer to sleep naked, myself."

Nice try Rebecca, but I don't scare that easily. I'm an old married man, remember? And I know you're bluffing. Possibly also flirting. Which is nice, but I know you don’t mean it. "Oh? That won't do at all. I'll loan you some pyjamas."

She raises a brow. "I'd not taken you for a prude, Mr Magaowan?"

"Nor had I taken you for such a floosie, Ms. Rayworth. I thought you were a convent girl."

There's a moment then when we look at one another. Does our banter demolish the wall or build it up? She blinks, backs down, retreats from the stair, looks bashful for a moment. "Well, there's no

rush, is there? Actually, I'm sorry to disappoint you, but I'll be sleeping in the camper tonight."

Victory! Though why a man should be elated at talking a woman out of sleeping with him is anyone's guess. What say you, Lewis? Man refuses to bed woman? What sort of headline is that?

She's laughing now. "I'm sorry, Tim. Strangers all year and suddenly I'm pushing my way into your life, crashing your summer holiday, even asking you to sleep with me so I can crash your dreams as well. Are you always this,... polite, with pushy people?"

Enough, Timothy: serious tone now, sober face and down to business. "We talked about lucid dreaming. That's why you're here."

"Yes, it is."

"Then I suggest we start with La Berge."

"What's that?"

"Not what. Who. La Berge is an author and expert on Lucid dreaming." I lead her to the bookcase, noting how readily she follows, putting an emphatic distance between her and the stairs. I pull down La Berge's Lucid Dreaming, and hand it to her. "I can also recommend this one - *The Yogas of Dream and sleep.* There you go,... make a start on that lot, and I'll make some tea."

"All right. So,... we start with trying to induce a lucid dream. But if I manage it, do you promise you'll try to come in with me?"

She refuses to let this drop.

"Okay, we'll see."

She smiles at that. Obviously her parents used to say the same thing to her. “We'll see,” then hopefully distract her with something else. I'll have to see if I can think of something to do the trick. She lets it go for now, but I'm not fooled; she's very determined in this and will remind me of it. It's just a pity I'm not half as convinced of the reality of shared mutual dreaming as she is. But then I'm forgetting it's more that I'm afraid of it, afraid it might be real, that it would push me into a territory I'm happier pretending does not exist.

"One other thing we've not mentioned," she says.

"Oh?"

"Emma talked of exchanging tokens. I give you something personal of mine, you give me something personal of yours."

"I just have."

"The books? No, I was thinking more of something you carry, something you wear."

"Like my wristwatch?"

"Okay. That'll do."

What? What am I doing? This is my father's watch. Still, I unbuckle it and, in exchange, she unclips the crucifix from around her neck, but something has me backing away from it. "I,.. I can't take that."

"Why not? Too much of the heathen in you? Or are you a vampire?"

Actually I'm thinking the crucifix is still warm from having nestled in her bosom. To wear it would have it sear itself upon my chest, if not my heart and have me thinking and dreaming of those soft amplitudes when I should be thinking and dreaming of other things. "I was thinking,... it must be very precious,... that's all"

"Not as precious as your watch. That's a Bernex - lovely moon-phase thingy too, and I take it it's not merely gold plated?"

"I mean, *personally* precious."

"Okay,... so look after it. And I'll look after this, or don't you value it much?"

"On the contrary, I value it a great deal. It was my father's. But I trust you with it."

Do you, Timothy?

Think about this, man: the woman has bewitched you into handing over your father's watch. *Your Father's watch!*

"I'll never knowingly let you down," she tells me, and then, more strangely still: "I trust you too. Trust you with my life."

"Don't say that."

"Why not? There's nothing like declaring your unflinching trust for making someone step up to the plate, is there?"

"So,... you don't mean it?"

"On the contrary, Timothy. I've been watching you all year and I mean every word."

She drops the chain around my neck, slips her own watch into her pocket and buckles the Bernex in place, shakes it a little to check it's secure, then repairs to the lounge with her books. I don't know what made me choose the watch, and I regret it now, for it is indeed a very precious thing to me. I have memories of it on my father's wrist, all those years he worked for it! Its pull on my imagination, my sense of self, is so strong I feel I now have to keep myself near this woman, for she possesses a fundamental part of me.

Meanwhile her cross is a weight upon my chest and I almost fear to breathe in case I feel the cool sting of it when I inhale. This exchange of tokens is not something I have ever thought of before. Reading of it in Emma's journal released in me no revelatory cascade of thought, but now I wonder at its power. Rebecca has shared with me her salvation in Christ-consciousness, while also robbing me of any awareness of time. I feel disorientated, adrift, and naked, but decide it's not a bad exchange.

Chapter 20

Rain, heavy upon the triple glazing now, long streaks reducing the outside to a loose impressionism. It remains snug and quiet within - just the gentle hiss of rain, and a sleepy crackle from the burner, by which Rebecca has now settled. She's brought notebook and pens from the camper, and presents a very studious image as she applies her critical intellect to the subjective world of dreams. She looks up at me now and then as I sit with Emma's journal. Occasionally I catch her and she smiles before returning to her reading.

The weirdness I felt, the strange nakedness without my father's watch, has passed now, and in its wake I feel a steady calm. It's impossible I can be this easy with her, impossible just being in the same room as her can make me feel this good. It's as if a subtle thread had settled into place, opening a warm channel, a connection of deep, tingling heat.

I would like my father's watch back, but while she possesses it my life shall remain extraordinary, and for now I would rather it be so, than return to what my life was without this stranger in it. My life in time.

So sleep with her Timothy!

No!

Anyway,...

Dream time, says Emma, *is of roughly the same duration as clock time. An hour in dream time is an hour in real time. This would tend to go against reports from those fortunate to have been snatched from the jaws of death, and who claim to have experienced the whole of their lives replayed in a matter of seconds. I can only assume the near death state is different to the dream, and one in which time becomes a more malleable concept, or is discarded altogether.*

But in the dream, though bound by time, we can greatly extend our experience by virtue of the fact we are not confined to the normal modes of travel. We need not take a ship in order to travel the world. We think of a place, and we are there. On the other hand, if we wish to slow down and sample every subtle nuance of a situation or a scene, we need only make this our intention.

Nor do we need to sleep in order to achieve a useful connection with the dreaming.. Native drumming has a peculiar effect upon the mind, when accompanied by meditative breathing, the images that arise being

of a similar lucidity to that of the dream world.

This is the realm of the shaman,...

And sometimes you don't even need the drumming, Emma - not for a quick foray, either to enlarge upon a previous scene from a dream, or to explore the dream-time in the vicinity of another person. I close my eyes, imagine the cabin, imagine Rebecca reading, as I saw her a moment ago, and keeping my eyes closed I turn up the lights and let the image of her be. She looks at me, sighs, blinks, looks dark for a moment. Fear? Disappointment? No, it's guilt. She's guilty about manipulating me because there are things she has not told me, things she is afraid to uncover about herself. These have more the feel of gentle intimations than full blown premonitions, which is why I'm more inclined to trust them.

Without moving, I get up and cross the room to her, sit beside her. She looks shy when I offer her my palms, but after a moment lowers the backs of her own hands into them. Then I breathe in and draw her energy into my own field.

The energy body, says Emma, *is the most vital part of who we are, yet it is entirely imaginary, undetectable by the surgeon's knife. It occupies the space of our physical form and regulates its function. It is not perfect and can suffer imbalance on account of emotional disturbances. These in turn can effect the gross body, causing sickness.*

When we enter the lucid dream, it is the energy body that carries us. When we touch another in the dream state, it is their energetic form we feel.

I feel something in Rebecca, a presence,... someone else, watching me. Dark, malevolent. A scene opens and I find her in a room. I have the impression of a torn dress, a bruised face, and a sheet clutched to her bosom as she sits on the side of the bed. She looks stricken, and I feel the same sinister presence, feel its anger, its bruised pride.

Where are we?

A cheap hotel,... a boarding house?

I was not expecting this, not so close to the surface of her being,...

She was hurt here. I see her legs, some bruising on her long white thighs - but no scar. This was something else - scene of a different kind of hurt. It was before the accident, then. A molestation then? A sexual transgression? Or at the very least a serious misunderstanding.

Seedy man abuses dancer!

Rebecca gives a start, and my eyes snap open to see she's dropped the book.

"Everything okay?" I ask.

She shivers,... "Oh,... you know? For a moment there it felt like someone stepping over my grave."

I feel ashamed - there's definitely something creepy about tapping into someone's energy field without their knowledge. Indeed there should be a law against it, except such a thing is too fanciful to be taken seriously by the law. Still, the fact there are no laws is no excuse, and I should not have done it,... and yet,... it was interesting,... because you never know what's going to pop up. I shall have to double the guard tonight, or that thing I felt, that seedy man, will be causing us both a lot of trouble in our dreams.

I'm not big on malevolent spirits, having learned how to avoid them, but I know they exist, and this thing has sought me out before. I recognise it by its smell. It's what I felt that first night at the cabin, when I was compelled to seek the protection of my girls. It's not troubled me since, and I don't blame it, for even the unquiet dead fear the wrath of the gods, as they still have things to which they cling. It confuses me though - I mean its association with Rebecca.

She turns back to her books, adjusts her spectacles and settles down once more. My dreams are tranquil things. I doubt hers will be the same with devils like that inside of her. It's as well I won't be sharing them.

Yes, Lewis.

Famous last words.

The rain slackens by mid-afternoon, and the sun breaks through, raising slow spirals of steam from the tarn. Rebecca is drawn to it, and shields her eyes as the sun slants through the glass. "It's so lovely here," she says.

"Not as salubrious as the Albion Hotel, though?"

"Don't be silly. Can you swim in the tarn?"

"Yes. It's not deep, but quite cold just now."

"Oh, Tim,... you're so lucky to have this place."

"Yes."

"I know Raul teases you about coming up here, but I can see why you're so fond of it. It's a wonder you can tear yourself away."

"I must admit it's been getting harder."

She blesses me with a smile, and there appear warm crinkles around her eyes. "You're very kind, you know? And very sweet. I'm sure women often take advantage of you."

"That must be why I usually avoid them."

"Usually?"

"Some just won't take no for an answer."

Rebecca Rayworth, Rita Hayworth, the Reverend Becky,... an unquiet heart, and an unquiet past! They make for stormy dreams. I'm reminded of her now some mornings as she sees her class in - the tired, crumpled look, the dark rims under her eyes. Could it be the reason she wants my company in her dreams isn't because she's afraid she'll get lost, but because she's afraid to enter alone at all in case of what her dreams might be?

Time we ate.

"Rebecca,... I was thinking,..."

She smiles, senses the gravity in my voice, but tries to defuse me by making light of it. "I thought I could smell burning - thought it was the wood stove."

"About,... sleeping."

Defensive now: "Oh?"

"It's up to you, of course. And I'm sure Rosy's perfectly comfortable, but like I said, there are two bedrooms here."

"Afraid the trolls might get me if I sleep out there?"

"I promise you there are no trolls on this mountain, only those we carry up on our backs."

"I'm glad to hear it. And,... thank you." She cracks a grin. "Life is strange. This time last week I barely knew you. Now it feels like I'm moving in."

"Yes,... odd. But you're welcome. Do you like strawberries?"

"Strawberries? I love them."

"Then shall we go pick some for tea?"

She nods, grinning girlishly. It's true, this time last week, I barely knew her - but like you, Lewis, she's been watching me for a long time.

And, in both cases, I don't know if I should be worried about that.

Chapter 21

Daemon: Hey, you a dreamer?

Dreamer: Yeah!

Daemon: Haven't seen too many of you around lately. Things have been tough lately for dreamers. They say dreaming's dead, no one does it any more. It's not dead, it's just that it's been forgotten, removed from our language. Nobody teaches it so nobody knows it exists. And the dreamer is banished to obscurity.

Well, I'm trying to change all that, and I hope you are too. By dreaming, every day. Dreaming with our hands and dreaming with our minds. Our planet is facing the greatest problems it's ever faced, ever. So whatever you do, don't be bored. This is absolutely the most exciting time we could have possibly hoped to be alive.

And things are just starting,...

Hmm? What?

It's from a movie, Tim,... you know? Waking life. Richard Linklater, 2001.

Oh, sure, I remember, but why am I thinking about that now?

I should be sleeping, but it's impossible with Rebecca under the same roof.

She's in the west-facing bedroom - a space identical to mine, except mine faces east. We have the landing between us, a twelve foot buffer of pine scented air, but I can still *feel* her. I heard her in the night as well. The shower room is between us, you see? She was naked, not five feet from where I lay my head - and just a few inches of pinewood hiding her from me.

Don't feel so old married-mannish now do you, Tim?

Are there other scars, I wonder, scars she has not spoken of? Does she have a Celtic tattoo, like she was teasing me about, first claiming, and then claiming not to have one? I bet she does. She might have had it done afterwards, when she knew her dancing career was over.

Steady, Tim.

The cabin is mostly wood, smells of pine and sweet cedar, and wood oil. It moves with the heat and the humidity, and the passage of the sun. I know all its sounds, have known them since childhood, when my parents would bring me here to spend summers with my aunt. All gone - the sense of a generation having

moved on. My turn now, at the front line of life and death.

My turn to die.

West. Her room faces west - the direction of sunset. The ancients laid their dead to rest so they might face the setting sun. Has she come to lead me into death?

The cabin breathes with her. I'm sure of it. I feel it in my bones as I lie here, restless and sweaty. Rebecca Rayworth, Rita Hayworth, the Reverend Becky. Dancer, chancer, would-be dreamer.

I have deployed my girls, sent them scouting in a wide circle around the cabin, hunting down my unease. Then I realised the source was much closer and pulled them back to the landing, to keep Rebecca's presence out. Then I remembered the malignant presence stalking her, and since I've yet to introduce her to her own psychic protection team, I could not in all conscience exclude her from my own. So, the girls now encircle her bed, but in imagining them, I am also imagining her - eyes lightly closed, hair fanned out upon the pillow, soft breaths and the scent of Chanel,..

There's a chance she could be lucid now. Sometimes it happens quickly for beginners. It can take some people years of dedicated practice to experience their first lucid dreams, while others can trigger one by merely reading a book on the subject. I don't want her to be frightened by what she finds.

I need more time to prepare her.

Meanwhile all I can do is lie here, wide awake, sweating.

The moon is almost new, just a sliver of white remaining now. It blocks the energy of the sun. Emma's right, odd things happen at this time of the month. It's much easier to hear the Faery whispering in your ears. Don't believe in the Faery, Lewis?

Of course you don't.

That's why you can't hear them.

The Faery never waste their breath where it's not welcome.

Dawn comes earlier than I'm ready for, breaking over the forest and the fells, a late season richness to it. I lie there a while, seeing if I can still tempt sleep, tempt more of a lying in, before admitting defeat. What did I expect, inviting her under my roof?

Pulling back the blinds I see golden clouds and a deep blue sky and the fells still black with shadow. The grass is dewy, also Rebecca's camper, Rosy, is soft with dew. Meanwhile a misty haze rises from the spruce and the pines, and a fish leaps in the tarn,

disturbing its mirror-stillness. Why do fish do that? Is it like dreaming for them? Is it so they can briefly know the feel of another world upon their skins?

I rise quietly, so as not to wake her, and shuffle downstairs - making sure I wear my gown and shorts in case she surprises me. No more shuffling about in the buff Timothy - not while you have a guest. That warm thread of connection feels more irksome this morning. It makes me wonder what I was thinking, pursuing this course. Is it that I'm so desperate for company? But how can I get rid of her now, and how do I go about asking her for my father's watch?

How did you get yourself into this?

Because you sought transformation?

No, I did not!

I brew coffee, take it out onto the rear deck, and am surprised to find Rebecca already there, sunning herself. She's wearing a bright red swimsuit, like in those adverts for healthy breakfast cereal, and she's sitting with her legs over the side, swinging them, dipping her toes into the glassy lake, sending out rings, like sonar pings into the vastness of it. Her hair is wet, as if from swimming. But I'd thought her costume was black - or did she bring more than one?

Clearly, swimming is something she enjoys.

Wait a minute - back up there a line or two, Timothy.

Lake? What lake?

Dreamshock!

I am still asleep.

I dreamed my restlessness, as I am dreaming now my wakefulness.

I laugh at the revelation, and settle in.

These false awakenings are becoming ever more surprising,

She makes big eyes at me, tucks her hands under her thighs and manages to look both shy and sexy. "Good morning, Mr Magowan."

"Good morning."

"So, what do you think?"

"About?"

"You have no lake at the cabin, remember? I had to create it."

Stay with it Tim,... this is interesting. Am I lucid? Yes,... yes, perfectly lucid.

And Rebecca?

She seems real enough, but there's no way of knowing if she's

actually there, or if I'm just dreaming her, you see? I don't know if she's a sister or child in the dreaming - the usual existential dilemma - how to prove the existence of anything or anyone outside one's own head.

Anyway, she can't possibly have entered the lucid state so easily, and sucked me in with her. We didn't follow any of Emma's guidelines - except of course for that peculiarly emotive exchange of tokens. I feel for the cross around my neck - it's not there - neither is she wearing my father's watch.

She appears to be waiting for a response.

"Timothy?"

Rule one, Lewis: treat all entities in the dreaming with respect. Rule two, treat them as if they are who they appear to be, while remaining mindful that they may be figments of your imagination.

"Em,... I like it."

She beams. "Not bad for a beginner. Are you sure you don't mind me messing with your space?"

I bring my coffee and sit beside her, setting the cup down on the deck. She looks so real, I swear she's flesh, but this is no guarantee of her immaterial reality; dream figures feel as real as I can imagine them to be. I feel her heat, and catch her scent radiating in rich, warm waves,... Chanel and lake-water - something mysterious and earthy beneath the sweetness.

I've shared my space with many such human-like entities before of course, talked to them, flirted with them, had the most amazing sex with them, carried my sensations of them back and been convinced of their reality - their feel, their scent, their character.

I have dined in the best hotels with famous actresses.

But they were not real.

I know, Lewis. Spooky, isn't it?

I cannot convince myself this is really Rebecca, but as with all characters in the dreaming, they present a sincere face, a confidence in themselves, but it tends to be a shallow thing and if you probe it, question it, they become upset when they realise they might not possess the depth they imagined they did. And it feels a cruel thing to do.

"I've,... tended to focus on the front of the place," I tell her.

"I know. That feels pretty solid, but the back, the west, that was soft as putty."

I can smell the freshly planed wood, like at the lakeside café

where I talked with Emma and Janice. Was that yesterday? No, it wasn't any-when, Timothy. You dreamed it, like you're dreaming this. This is simply *now*, this is the eternal moment, the place where time stops, or rather it is the nexus where time - all times - connect. Emma's company is just a short walk through the woods, yet a century and a half away.

Don't think too much about this, Tim.

Let it evolve naturally, as dreams do.

There are books on the deck, piled on top of a picnic rug: Emma's journal, The Yoga of Sleep, Lucid Dreaming. There are also a pair of big sunglasses, and sun-cream.

"It's going to be hot," she says. "I can feel the sun on my back already."

Her stick is beside her, within reach. She follows my eyes - reads my mind, possibly, or is so integral a part of it, she knows my thoughts as I think them - I mean purely because I am thinking her into being.

"Yes,... strange," she says. "You'd think I'd be able to walk all right in here, but I can't. So much for thinking I'd be able to dance."

"You may have carried the expectation in with you. I'm sure it's just a question of recalling how it was before your accident. Have you a scar?"

She studies her thigh, strokes her finger down the length of it in a way that raises a tingle in my loins. "No scar." She clenches her fist and pommels it into her muscles. "A bit flabby though. I need to work out."

"It's,... early days, give it,..." did I nearly say time? "We can normally do anything we want here. We can even fly, you know?"

"Do you do that? Fly?"

"No. When you listen to the tales of lucid dreamers that's the one thing they talk about - how they love to fly. I've tried, but it tends to wake me up - too far outside my normal experience. I prefer to walk, or drive, or if I need to be somewhere a long way away, I just think myself there."

She gives me an impish smile, this avatar, this projection of Rebecca. I had no idea I could remember her so well, but then the mind gathers all sorts of information, all manner of subliminal gleanings. "We need a boat," she says. "So we can see how big the lake is."

"I'm guessing it's as big as we want. We just make it up as we go

along. And if we want a little town along its shore, for shopping, or a little café for coffee, then we make that as well. Shall we try?"

She thinks a moment, then shakes her head. Am I really making her do that? How do I read it? What message is there in the dream for me, seeing her like this. "No," she says. "That would be cheating. I'm sure we can do all those things, like I changed the cabin and made this lake, but is it not more fun to take the dream as you find it? I mean,... who's dreaming the dream, Tim?"

"Well,... I suppose,... *we* are."

"Are we? But you see that fish? I'm not dreaming that. Are you?"

There's a rainbow trout nosing among the pilings of the deck - beautiful, iridescent, dreamy. But no, I am not dreaming it. "Not consciously,..."

So what's the dream telling me here? That we don't make *all* of it up? That it comes from somewhere else, greater than ourselves? But we can change things if we want, we can *do* anything we want,...

Sure, Tim, but as in life it does not make those actions meaningful. And that is the difference between the skilled and the unskilled.

This is nothing I've not thought of before. In the dreaming, we can ride great waves of meaning, or we can fritter our time away simply learning how to fly.

She leans towards me then, leans close so I can smell her hair. It's peaty, earthy from the lake - something earthy about her as well. There's also a surge of erotic energy, which I try to divert, but too late,....

"You're not dreaming this either," she says. Then her hand swims fishlike, inside my gown, finds the opening in my shorts, and takes a hold of what it finds there.

There is an immediate shudder of pleasure at her touch, at first shockingly cool, but heating quickly. I must have experienced this before, the exquisite feel of myself swelling into a woman's fist. I don't recall it, but again that's the way with dreams, that they can deny us the one piece of information that changes the meaning of things so profoundly.

And yet,...

Her touch is not sexual - not really - there's something innocent about it. She's just,... curious.. "It's so hot," she says. "I never thought it would be hot. That would be quite nice inside of me, I think."

I *am* making this up. These are male thoughts, male fantasies.

And as always when I'm afraid in the dreaming, I forget the rules: "You're not real, are you. I'm dreaming you."

She looks crestfallen. "How would you know?"

"I don't for sure. But, Rebecca, please; I've never survived an orgasm in the dreaming. It always wakes me up."

Curious, she moves her hand in a wave like rhythm. "Really? Might I be so close as that,... just doing it like this?"

"Yes."

"That's amazing. Take off your clothes, Tim?"

Stop it!

This is not how we see Rebecca.

We are overcompensating. We are creating the inverse of her convent-school chastity, turning her into a lascivious vamp in a sex red swimming costume. And it doesn't work! It doesn't feel *true*.

"Haven't you ever been naked in dreams?" she says.

"Only when I'm afraid of letting people see me as I really am."

"And how is that? Really?"

"As a mystic, a dreamer."

"And why can't you let people see you as those things?"

"Because it just won't do. I have to be reliable, safe, sure, plain old Mr Magowan, all tweed jacketed and staid, and boring. Please. You must let go, or I'm going to,..."

"You needn't be like that with me. Come on, show me the unclothed Timothy Magowan, baggy belly and all, or I shall melt your clothes from you with my imagination, give you the body of Adonis and a willy the size of a donkey, and your orgasm will blow you into the middle of next week."

I laugh at that, then stand, for at least if I stand she must let go of me. Then I disrobe, slide down the shorts and step from them.

There: the unclothed Timothy Magowan!

Imagine it, Lewis.

I am hardly Adonis, and I'm feeling a little ashamed of my pale body - white hairs on my chest, and a belly beginning to sag. If a woman were ever to desire me again, it would have to be for my mind. And my mind is such a mess. She catches my hand, kisses it, then holds it to her cheek and without a trace of sarcasm she says: "Oh, but you're so beautiful Tim."

"Then why are you smirking?"

"I'm not,... I was just thinking,..."

"Hmm?"

"I could have as much sex as I want in here, and still wake up a virgin."

Steer the dream away, Tim.

We're flirting with this image of Rebecca, coming dangerously close to seeing her as something we ought not to. "Except true virginity is in the mind, Rebecca. And you clearly lost yours a long time ago."

What? What was that you just said, Tim?

She flinches, and I bite my tongue. "I'm sorry, I meant no disrespect."

Too late; the mood changes, the sky darkens. Thunderheads rise from behind the fells and throw shadows upon the water. She looks about, afraid.

"It's no problem," she says. "Don't worry about it."

But it *is* a problem, and deeper than I suspected, and I *should* worry about it. She hugs herself, shivering a little. "Cold suddenly," she says. Then she snatches her feet from the water and jumps back upon the deck.

"*Fuck!* Are they,... piranhas?"

At first I'm thinking only of how nimbly she leaped, wondering if its just a question of her not thinking about her injury, of being distracted from it. Except she's not real, Timothy, you are dreaming her, making her do these things. You must look into yourself for an explanation of them. I look below and see the water is now a seething, boiling mass of fish with comically big teeth. They appear to be gurning at us. One of them leaps from the water, and its expression might have been terrifying, like a gargoyle, snapping at us, had it not also looked so clownish.

It hovers there a moment longer than is physically feasible - at least in the real world - so I have time to deliver it a stinging slap, not violently meant, more slapstick, and comedic. It falls back into the water. We cannot be physically harmed in the dreaming, so one of us isn't thinking straight - and I'm sure it isn't me. But Rebecca isn't real, so it cannot be her dreaming it either - unless this really is Rebecca, lucid in the dreaming, and that's unthinkable.

The shoal takes startled fright and scatters.

She's horrified. "Did you see that thing?"

"Yes. I think you created it. The weather too,... the threatening storm. Look, you're right there's a background to dreams, and

events can unfold of their own accord, and we can learn things from them, but we can also contaminate the environment, take it over with our fears and our expectations. What we expect, we get. Try to relax and think calm thoughts, or we'll never make sense of anything,... and a pool of fake piranhas will be the least of our worries."

"But if I'm not real, like you're thinking I'm not, I can't do that, and it must be coming from you, so *you* calm down, Timothy."

She looks around again, then covers her mouth and gasps. She's seen someone or something in the shadows, in the woods, watching us. How do I know this? I feel the watcher too.

"Who is it, Rebecca?"

"I,... I don't know."

"Then who do you suspect? Remember, there are no trolls on this mountain - only those we carry up on our backs."

"I,.. I can't say. Look, it's raining now and the books are getting wet. We should go in." She bends down to collect them.

"It doesn't matter, they're not really there,..."

"Please, Tim. Let's go back inside. *Please!*"

"Rebecca, this is the dreaming. We deal with our fears here by seeking them out and transforming them."

She's not listening. She gathers up her things and trots inside, sliding the door shut with an emphatic bang. I feel a judder of emotion and the dream wobbles for a moment. I fear I'm about to lose my lucidity, my control, so I focus on my hands, on the pattern of their lines, and ease myself back in.

There.

Stable again. Just about.

Well done Tim. Still lucid. This is something of a record,

I bend to pick up my clothes, discover my shorts have fallen through the boards of the deck into the lake below and are now floating away. I'm about to curse, then remember myself, sink back into the dream of it and wonder what it means. Is the dream telling me I should expose my real self to Rebecca more often - I mean metaphorically.

Don't waste your time analysing any of this , Lewis. The dream is too upset for the meaning to be clear.

Breathe. Summon the girls. Let them fan out, smooth your way back into the pure stream.

Yes,... that's better.

The sun returns, the clouds shrivel and the lake resumes a glassy calm. But wait,... he's still there. I feel him - binoculars in the trees, a glint of sunlight on glass, a shadow moving. I feel,.. what? Vulnerable, standing there on the deck? What was it I said about dreams of nakedness being indicative of a fear of revealing our true selves? I resist the urge to cover myself, and stand there instead displaying my manhood like a gibbon, I suppose, thinking to intimidate him with it. Feeling a little small, Timothy? No problem, I make it much BIGGER! He shrinks back, unsure. A cowardly spirit. An inexperienced dreamer.

Wishful thinking, in more ways than one.

The girls sprint after him, blades drawn. He won't last long but, since the dead are already dead, neither can he be dispatched by psychic force alone, at least not for long, always assuming he's dead and not just dreaming, not just still hung up on Rebecca - which suggests a kind of love - which is good - or obsession - which is bad. Still, at least I have the measure of him now.

And Rebecca wanted to hold *mine*, not his.

Bastard!

Woa!

Childish, Timothy,... remember, none of this is what is seems.

Chapter 22

The cabin is empty, no sign of her, even when I tap on her bedroom door and peer within. Indeed, there's no sign she ever slept there at all. Did the fright wake her? No, remember, you're still asleep and only dreaming she was ever there at all. Or then again, not. She might have dreamed of butterflies and unicorns for all you know.

See how the dream informs reality, Lewis?

See how the dream makes true what is not?

And makes false what is true.

See how careful we must be?

The next question is how long I shall remain in the dreaming myself. My dreams normally need action to sustain them - but not too much, nor too little. I have yet to successfully read a book in a dream without it waking me, which makes for a less dramatic exit than flying, though a much less pleasing one than sex. Sex is an option of course, but such things are losing their appeal. No, really, Lewis; when any kind of sex at all is available, and entirely without consequence, it loses its spice, and a man finally learns the benefits of not objectifying a woman in ordinary waking reality. Sex then takes on a new dimension - and nowhere near so predictable,...

It's what women want, I'm told.

Except they still clearly do not want me.

It's true. I speak like a man of the world, but I've had no one since Miranda.

And enough of sex!

This is the dream speaking again, amplifying my weaknesses.

Ugh,... wake up damn it!

I go back down to the kitchen to find a book, and find instead Emma, waiting. She's wearing a long blue suit with a dainty straw hat. I'd say the hip hugging fashion was very 1890's, which is a little after her time, and I can't explain that, but either way, as you might appreciate, she makes an unlikely figure sitting on a barstool, in the kitchen of my cabin in the early part of the twenty first century. All of this is explainable, as Rebecca pointed out, by my liking for costume dramas. But I never cared for Austen. I was always more a Thomas Hardy man. But Emma is not your typical Hardy heroine. Far too,... assertive and sure of herself for that.

"You left the door open," she says. "You should take more care -

you never know who's lurking about."

I slip my dressing gown on, muttering something to the effect that my girls have it covered. She gives me a saucy twinkle. "Which is more than we can say about you, darling." She gestures shamelessly with her eyes. "Pity there wasn't a happy ending to that. I haven't seen one of those for a long time - too long a civil service wife, I'm afraid. My husband neglects me terribly in that department."

"Ah,... I'm sorry to hear that."

She rolls her eyes. "Shame to waste it. If you like we could?..."

"What?"

I'm still thinking about the sex - can't *stop* thinking about it, apparently. I'm even contaminating Emma with it. I give an exasperated sigh. Even in the dreaming, a man can be hoist by his own petard.

She reads my hesitation, returns more to herself. "I agree," she says. "Ours is clearly not that sort of relationship. Besides you're still thinking about Rebecca, so it would hardly be decent, but let me know if you change your mind. It's all the same to me. In addition, I would add that contrary to my husband's beliefs, and your twenty first century prejudice, I am quite skilled in that way."

"My prejudice?"

"Every generation thinks it invented sex, that the previous generations were clueless and frigid. But I have the benefit of viewing history from a different perspective and find that the opposite is actually true. You so called moderns really have no idea. The average orgasm lasts a matter of seconds with your generation - and believe me I've asked around - but with only a little practice it can be stretched out for hours. Imagine that, Timothy!"

Stop it. You're doing it again. You're nearly fifty years old. Isn't it about time you grew out of these childish fantasies? Emma is your guide. Why ruin that? Emma is all you have in this place. Or did the coming of her journal mean so little?

"I'm familiar with the tantric literature," I assure her. "Just fearful for my sanity."

"You need only fear that your heart wouldn't be in it. You've never experienced it because you don't believe it's possible. You moderns,... ah,... you're losing so much."

This is true. Materialism is killing us, stealing our dreams and locking the doors on a greater awareness. But it's like alcohol - we

know the dangers, yet we simply can't help ourselves.

"Will she be all right? Rebecca, I mean?"

"Oh, I dare say she'll be in a poor mood tomorrow, but you know what they say: *you have to live with someone to know what they're really like.* But at least she's moving about a little better." She indicates Rebecca's walking cane where she left it on the deck. She's right; Rebecca's movements had been graceful, fluid.

At least in the dreaming.

"Was it really her though? Or did I just make her up? Rebecca wouldn't have done that,.. would she? I mean, touched me like that. I made her do it. It was just my imagination."

"That's for you to work out," says Emma."And her. I couldn't possibly interfere. But as you know my advice is to leave it alone, not talk about it, and let things develop how they will. What happens in the dream is best left in the dream, Timothy. Anything else it just too complicated."

Do I fool myself or is there something of a challenge in her voice? "I'm inclined to agree."

She gives me a knowing smile. "I'm sure you are. "

"But I'm also curious, and I want to help her. And to help her I need to know more about her."

"Ah,... the ethics of invading someone's psychic space. It depends if you mean well. And I think you do. What does your intuition tell you?"

"That she was attacked - raped, possibly."

"It's an easy assumption to make, given what you know about her. However, speaking as your intuition, I'd prefer to say she fought him off, then paid the price of his wounded ego."

"Revenge? Then her accident wasn't an accident?"

"I'm sure he didn't mean her to be so badly hurt as that - just publicly humiliated. We react through our karmic tendencies, don't we? And his were very dark. But there may also be guilt at what he did, and it's his guilt that binds him to Rebecca now as much as his desire. And if that's so, it's a hopeful sign - at least so far as his karma is concerned. Guilt is, after all, the mother of good conscience and all change for the better."

"But what binds her to *him*?"

"Her revulsion. That terrible unclean feeling she gets every time she thinks about it."

"And this guy's dead now, I suppose? Which makes him difficult

to deal with."

"Not dead,... not necessarily," she says. "Just bound to her, emotionally. I'm thinking he was a theatre director, or a choreographer. But a terribly low sort, the kind who offers the lead role to any dancing girl who'll sleep with him. "

"It's a pity we're just making this up as we go along."

Emma leans over, takes my hand, squeezes it. "I know. But intuitions can be powerfully informative things, especially in the dreaming."

"It does have a plausible feel to it."

"And sometimes that's all we need to be going on with. Shall we have tea?"

"I was rather hoping I could,... wake up, actually. This is really dragging on - no disrespect - but I don't understand any of it. I need some sober reflection in the cold light of day."

"I know what you mean. Struggling to wake up myself this morning. So,.. keep me company until we do?"

She draws the long pin from the hat and feigns prodding at me with it, but I'm ready for her this time and withdraw my hand. She laughs, sets both the hat and pin down, then pours tea into fine china cups I'm assuming she's brought with her, because I don't own any.

"You're not that keen to wake up then."

She tugs open the top button of her coat, exposing the milk white hollow of her throat, and I'm tempted to reconsider her offer of lovemaking - because I'm sure she's very good at it, and I could do with being reminded of what that feels like at the hands of a sympathetic soul. She reads my thoughts and tut-tuts, then we settle in like a couple of inverted insomniacs, riding the dream together.

Is she real, Lewis?

Who?

Emma,... I'm talking about Emma now!

Or am I merely conflating the discovery of that journal with another of my dream sprites. Did Emma *exist*? And what does that even mean? Muse? Goddess? But she is also a consummate shape-shifter. Shape-shifting, she is now *Lady* Emma Louise Hollander, member of a shadowy founding order of the Hermetic Revival , several of whose members, otherwise rich and idle, and ever so literary, went on to gather around the mysterious Madame Blavatsky, and her fellow theosophists in Paris in the 1880's.

Facts, Lewis.

But facts are cheap.

You know this, being, as you are, such a collector of them.

The dreaming invents them on the fly and makes them true. But it does not make them meaningful. Or does it? I had thought that was the whole point of the dreaming.

Lady Emma was wedded to the influential and Machiavellian Sir Edward Hollander of her Majesty's Foreign Office, not the humble civil servant she once described to me, not the sort of man who would sooner grow rhubarb in his suburban Chelsea garden. This is a man with properties in London and the North - "the North" being the Northern Lakes and Penrith in particular. Sir Edward Hollander, confidante of kings, corrupter and blackmailer of foreign princes, all round big-wig, gentleman and spy. Perhaps you know of him Lewis? Do they teach you about your heritage, or do they just take you fresh from university, newly charged with your transferable skill-set, and plug you straight in?

And she's *dreaming*! As I am dreaming.

She is not dead, Lewis.

How can this be?

She watches me as I make these connections, perhaps feeds them to me subliminally, but says nothing.

"Emma,... you must know so much,... having spent so long in the dream-time,... and what with your connections, and your studies, and your experience,.."

"Oh,.. serious face. Be careful what you ask me now, Timothy."

"What's the point of it?"

"The point of what?"

"This. Everything. We live, we die, we spend an eternity in the dreaming, or we're reborn and then we die again - I mean I'm not afraid dying, so long as I die peacefully and I'm guessing it goes on in some form for ever, but still I wonder what's the point of it?"

"Are you serious?"

"Yes, I wouldn't joke about something like that."

"I suppose you wouldn't. Well,... it doesn't go on for ever. Not necessarily. Only for as long as we need it to."

"Ah,... you're talking about oneness. Accepting it. Becoming one with *it*."

"Yes. Love opens its arms to us every day, and it says *embrace me, know me, but know also the price shall be the sacrifice of your self.*

So, do you want me or don't you? And we answer *'no, not yet,... let me know a little more of life first.*"

"But learn what? What are we learning, Emma?"

"That there is no point to it, other than the realisation of that one sobering fact, that there is no point, at least not to the world of forms - you know: objects, things, thoughts,...even the other people we see as forms, and they just go on and on, and us with them. But the forms have no point in themselves, and neither does our life in form. We have to move beyond it. This is tricky, I'll grant you - but only then are we ready to say yes, instead of no. But you can't just *say* 'yes', Timothy, you have to feel 'yes', in your heart, dissolve all the karmic tangles in your mind and then love will accept you. Until then, all you have are the forms,... the ones we think we're dealt in life, and the ones we make up as we go along,...

"We still go on forever, absorbed as love, but to get there we have to let go of who we think we are - our thoughts, our memories. Let them all go. We are all of us simply going home, Timothy, all of us lost in the woods, looking for the way. But even when we find it, when we know for sure the way out,... we hesitate,..."

"We do?"

"Of course we do. Well, I certainly do, or I wouldn't be sitting here with you in this lovely liminal zone, or watching the sun setting over the mountains of Baluchistan from my little bungalow window, getting on for two hundred years after my time - at least from your perspective - now would I?"

I should be writing this down. It has the feel of a slippery dream - one that's not going to let me remember the important bits. After all, she's just told me the meaning of life. I'm hardly likely to get away with keeping that little gem when I wake up am I?

"Knowing it doesn't help, Timothy," she says, reading my mind. "Lots of people *know* it. *You* know it. It's living it that's the key. Your challenge is to let go. To let go of the old Timothy. Embrace the new. Anyway it's all in my journal. You've just not read that far yet."

"I don't know anything."

"Yes you do. You know about love."

"How to lose it, how to ache for it, how *not* to experience it."

"Love in life is the same, Timothy. To experience it in all its human glory, we must first accept the death of our self. We must

first accept the wisdom in letting go of ourselves, then we can let in the other."

I cannot let go of myself; I cannot change; I cannot transform my life from what it is to what it could be. I cannot even talk about it, so I distract her with a tangential question: "Do you love your husband?"

"Heavens no."

"Then,...."

"These are just the times I'm living in, darling, and we must be accepting of them."

She nibbles daintily on a finger of shortbread, drums her fingers on the counter. "My, it's hanging on isn't it? Shall we go somewhere else? Freshen things up a little?"

Internet searches will tell me all about Lady Emma Louise Hollander, but for now I don't need to scour the clouds for information. You can look her up in your own time Lewis, cross reference us, across time - indeed, I'd like that very much - I'd like my snooper's file to be cross referenced with a woman like her, but in the dreaming all things that are known and relevant are instantly available to the receptive mind.

Still, I wonder why she did not tell me all of this in the first place.

"So as not to dazzle you, darling," she says. "How else do you think I get away with my strange habits? My strange liaisons. Only the gentry can indulge their whims the way I do."

"Then you don't die of fever out in India?"

"Oh,.. I'm afraid that bit's true, for the most part - the reaper does not discriminate between the haves and the have nots and it is rather a highly probable attractor for my various lines in time. But I don't suffer much, and that's a blessing."

So,...

I dress, and we leave the cabin, link up like a couple about to take a stroll in the forest, except the first turn leads us down a cobbled alley between old sandstone buildings. It's overhung with wisteria and Virginia creeper, but becomes progressively more urban and bare and black stained. Then we're stepping out into the busy heart of contemporary Penrith, not far from Whittaker's bookshop.

Penrith? What is it about Penrith that keeps linking me back to it?

There are women in pink tights and floppy jumpers pushing squealing children in prams, and there are heavily tattooed bruisers, their bare arms and legs painted like Maori warriors. I make to step aside from them, to let them pass us by, wondering why they don't look askance at Emma in her Victorian clothing, why they don't hurl bigoted insults at her strangeness. Then I realise they do notice her, that indeed they step aside for us. The women lower their eyes and nod their heads in deference. The bruisers likewise raise their fingers to their eyebrows, as if to doff their caps, had they been wearing any.

Emma pays them no attention, as if it were all merely expected. Then, suddenly, she stops and takes in the crowds, the roaring traffic. "What year is this?"

"I don't know,.. it looks familiar. Now, I'd say. My now."

"Yes,... that's possible. I'm mixing my dream-space with your timeline. I thought the town looked queer. How do you bear it? The noise? The smell?"

"Ah, you know,... one adjusts to what's familiar. I'd probably find it eerie with nothing but horses and carts and gas-lamps."

She smiles. "Strange, if this should be the pinnacle, Timothy, the very peak of mankind's rise in time. I don't think much of it, really. I see a people enamoured of their technology, but still relatively unskilled in the things that matter. What do you say?"

She makes a show of slipping a smart-phone from the pocket of her jacket, laughs at my expression. "Funny little things aren't they? A miracle at first sight. In my version of the now, it still takes three months to get a letter from England to Bombay. They'll soon compress that to six weeks when they start operating the steam packets, and then will come the miracle of the telegraph. But these things? They can connect me to anyone, anywhere in the world. Instantly." She shrugs, tosses it into a bin. "Then why do I sense everyone feels so isolated from one another? You'd think to look at them they had no idea of the connections that already exist."

"Well,... they don't. We've forgotten how to dream."

She looks up into the cloud flecked sky, squints at a passing helicopter - bright yellow, roaring urgently in the direction of the fells. Mountain rescue. "Broken leg," she says. "Bruises, mild concussion, and a touch of exposure. On the crags by Red Tarn. Fell from Swirral edge. So many come to grief there, don't they?" She looks at me, sighs, her chest swelling as if in appreciation of the air.

"Sorry, rambling. Go on, ask me."

"What do you mean - the pinnacle?"

"That your time-line goes no further than this. That these are the last days of your time-line, that the final fall of night might be coming."

"You're telling me this asteroid really hits the earth?"

"I don't know, Timothy. I can't see your future, only sometimes I can feel out the probable connections. And I sense something big *is* coming. Could that not be it? It's feasible isn't it?"

"I suppose so. But I can't believe no one survives. If it's true, then governments already know. They're just playing it down for now, and in the mean time they're preparing, moving underground. People. Supplies. Seeds. Tools. They could survive for years in an artificial environment, make their own oxygen, like they do on submarines. Then, start to repopulate."

"But who would be chosen to repopulate?"

"I don't know - specialists to begin with. People trained to survive. Probably young people, people still,... fertile."

"But not *dreamers*, Timothy. Dreaming is a luxury these chosen ones will not have, and alas one they will not be taught, for the criterion dictating your survival as a species will forbid it. We will evolve into a race of the living dead - not a dream in our heads. And that's a dark place from which there's no reaching the likes of me any more. That may be why we never meet anyone beyond your timeline - that it's not the people who die, but their ability to dream meaningfully."

She's saying the rise of the "suited" man is almost complete, that it took an economic collapse to wipe out the last vestiges of any social dimension to the world, and a cataclysmic environmental disaster to wipe out the last vestiges of dissent - the dreamers among us.

Do you hear that Lewis?

Soon, there will only be two classes - the suits and the slaves. The suits have a chance, they have the money and they have the soldiers, and they have you. Theirs is the power and the glory, not God's. And even the slaves will have had their dreams bred out of them.

I sound like a Youtube conspiracy video.

I'm glad I won't be around to see it!

God help you, Lewis.

Why did you refuse the suit, Timothy? And why are you standing in the middle of Penrith with a woman a hundred and fifty years out of date? What else is she trying to say to you?

"Emma? Why here? I mean - you must know lots of exotic places, places I've never heard of. We could have gone anywhere. Gone to your bungalow - I'd love to see that. So, why Penrith on a cold, rainy afternoon at what might turn out to be the latter end of my time-line."

"You once said you'd prefer to be sitting right underneath it when it struck, that there would be no surviving the aftermath. Your nuclear war of the seventies and eighties, and your latter day Armageddon,... whatever it might be. Well, what if it were to be here. Ground zero, I think you call it?"

"Penrith?"

She shrugs.

Is this true or isn't it? Or is she just playing what-ifs?

"It would mean your cabin's is ground zero too, of course - at least, as near as makes no difference."

"The North West of England? Ha!"

"You're laughing? It's hardly funny, Timothy." But she's smiling. It *is* funny.

"It's about time we were famous for something."

"Listen, perhaps it's not too late to change things. What if you survived? I mean being a dreamer, you could make all the difference, pass on the dreaming to future generations, then when they finally emerge from their caves with their seeds and their tools to replant civilisation, they will still have their dreams to guide them. And if you had an apprentice,.. like Rebecca,... it might work. But if you want that chance, then you must make plans now. Go to the other side of the planet, preferably the Southern Hemisphere. Tell me, have we still friends in the Antipodes?"

"You mean Australia?"

"Take Rebecca there, if she'll go. I like her darling, you'll be good for each other, and you're both teachers. Make it your mission to teach something worthwhile. In Australia, it's possible some may survive on the surface, without the underground support of their governments. And there's an indigenous people who have not forgotten how to dream. Learn all you can from them. It'll be the work of generations even to get back to a modicum of civilisation, but God forbid there should be no dreamers left in the world."

She gathers me close and, somewhere in the folds of her jacket, where my eyes lay me to rest, Penrith melts to desert and a flame red sky. I'm somewhere beyond the cantonment of Karachi, now, circa 1860, amid the dust and the heat.

What are we saying here Lewis? Am I to treat the dream as a premonition? Or does it's meaning lie beneath the literal? It doesn't need an asteroid to wipe the dreamers out. It's been happening for generations now. No one reincarnates in our time any more. Why would they, when it has so little to offer them?"

Emma reads my thoughts and sighs. "I know, darling. Just think on it. All I've shown you. I'm not saying any of this is true, because I really don't know. I'm just a time-traveller. And the truly wise spirits rarely bother with the liminal zones such as these."

She feels so comforting, rocks me like a mother. She feels like love, and she's asking me to accept her, to embrace her. And I would say yes, I *have* said yes, but she senses the reserve in me, and knows I am neither ready to let go of life, nor yet change it into something more useful.

Chapter 23

Dawn. Awake. Properly awake! Dull half-light, hints of a clear sky and coming sun - not unpromising. I reach for the 'Droid like a man climbing from a well and tap out the dream, queue it for squirting into the clouds. Except it's not the clouds, is it, Lewis? That's just a euphemism, a romantic name for a network of earth bound computers on which I purchase gigabytes via my Internet service provider. How long then will my words outlive me? Is it only so long as I pay my bills? Is that all I am to the world: a current account and a list of direct debits? And what if they were erased? Would I cease to be? Would I cease to have ever been?

Wait, I'm forgetting that snooper's file, cross referenced to my IP address. I am also *that*. And neither of them the truth, only facts to be interpreted whichever way the wind is blowing at the time.

But what is this?

Am I a danger to you, Lewis? What is it about me that makes you so afraid you must monitor my ramblings? Do you seek the solution of future crimes against the state in them? What is it that troubles you? Is it that I can so fundamentally reject your interpretation of reality? Does it make me a cyber insurgent - I shall redact that word later - redact also the word redact - expunge them - erase,... oh, you know what I mean.

I am immortal, Lewis?

You heard Emma. I cannot cease to be until I *accept love*. Does that not make you question the truth of things yourself, even a little? And what are you to me? Haven't you guessed it? You are my immortality in material terms, for I presume you have deep bunkers, far beyond the reach even of God's thunderbolts. And what other purpose would you serve anyway - archiver of meaningless minutiae - when there is no one left for you to spy upon?

Forgive me.

I bear you no malice.

In another life we might even be friends.

I might even have taught you.

Ah,... but the feel of Emma is still upon me; wise, regal, confident,... all the things I am not. And for a while I lie here thinking of her, the warm glow of her existence fading slowly. Yet,

as ever, I fear, as with all the marvels in my head, that she is only something I make up - thoughts spun around an old journal, gifted to me by a widowed bookseller, about to lose his business.

I remember Rebecca, now, sleeping in the other room and catch my breath, cut the world to silence as I listen for her, but the cabin carries nothing of her presence at all - not her breath, not her scent, and I know she's gone. She has run out of my waking reality, as she ran out of my dream last night.

I check.

No trace.

The duvet has gone from the room, her notes all gathered up. The camper, Rosy, too, is gone. I wonder: did I even dream her coming? It would not be unusual, given the run of things lately. Yet, there must be some tangible trace that it was real, that all was well, if only for a time, between us. Wait,... there! I see the pots we used last night, on which we ate our meal, now standing on the drainer. Two plates, two cups. It's not much, I know, but *something*.

No note, Lewis.

Damn.

But then again I might still be dreaming this, dreaming the two cups, the two plates. It does happen - I think I've woken from a dream, but the waking is false - I've told you this before, haven't I?.

Ughh, queer feeling this morning.

This business with the asteroid is really getting to me, and I wish I didn't dream of it so often. It's beginning to feed on itself now, and what I really need from the world is reassurance that things are going to go on as normal.

For ever

Oh, really, Tim?

I thought *normal* was the last thing you wanted. *Normal* is Strickland parading his five E's and you hiding like a coward, hoping he won't pick on you for not wearing a suit.

You are such a timid rebel.

Pathetic.

What you want, Timothy, is such a shock that your transformation shall feel like the very least of your worries.

You are like those American survivalists holed up in their backwoods cabins with their assault rifles; you want it all to go to hell then you can regain a sense of power over your own destiny.

No.

Oh,... bad dreams, last night, Lewis. A long dream, and many false awakenings. They make for a very shaky start to the day.

I take coffee out onto the front step and there I sit with Emma's journal, but I'm not reading. My attention is easily drawn this morning, and I find myself watching instead the swallows catching flies over the tarn. They sense, like me, a coming rain. Again. Clouds are gathering, thickening, dark bases and great white anvil heads rising. It's like in the dream, as in the dream Rebecca's mood darkened. Is that it then? Did she dream badly too? But more,... did she dream of me swelling into her fist?

Is her going on account of her embarrassment?

What else would explain it?

Damn! Before we slept we had both been getting on so well.

But that's no guarantee, Timothy – as you know women are more complex than can be fathomed by the likes of you. Rebecca has changed her mind about the dreaming, that's all. She has taken a different kind of fright - that she would rather not become more intimate with you, that she would rather you did not get the wrong idea about her. Women are most likely to do that when men have been persuaded there is an affinity. It is a part of their power. The promise of intimacy, then its denial.

But she would have left a note, surely? No, people don't leave notes any more, Timothy. They send one another texts. And this is a dead zone, remember?

Where did she take me last night?

Emma, I mean.

Penrith, was it? Ground zero, she said. Or didn't say *exactly* - only hinted, only suggested probabilities. Don't think about this now, Tim; move away from it. But,... it really would be something, wouldn't it – an asteroid, I mean? What would people do if they knew they had so little time? Would they run? Would they stampede their way to the other side of the planet? Would they become savage and entirely self serving? Would the men become lost to a fever of rapine?

And what would people do if they weren't sure? If their governments were silent and their only updates came from the Internet and the big tit red-tops? Would they panic, or would they settle down into a pitiful lethargy, holding on to the last vestiges of normality, of the familiar, until the moment the asteroid darkened their horizon?

And why do you exclude yourself from this collective, Timothy?

You're in this too, you know?

Then why do I feel so apart from it?Is it that you're so sure you can simply slip away into your dreams, and live in them, for ever? Your exploration of the dreaming is of no use to a world that has lost its dreams. Are you the kind then to stick around and poke people with a sharp stick until they wake back into the dreaming again,... or do you leave them to it, retreat into your dreams, to be forgotten.

Too many questions before breakfast.

I know.

They can spoil a man's day.

I overwhelm you, Lewis, don't I? Well no one asked you to snoop on me. In material terms I'm probably what you might class as harmless, compliant even. But that does not make the truth of me any simpler to fathom.

All right, just answer me this one: If Emma died in the 1860's, how come she was dressed in the fashion of the 1890's? Or does it not matter? Of course it doesn't. Really, it makes no difference, because you were only dreaming, stupid!

Therin lies the difference between us, Lewis.

It is important, I think.

Okay,...

Mid-morning now, and the fells are darkening with the coming storm, the air impressively still and humid, steam rising from the ferns and from the tarn. I'm too agitated for Tai Chi and pray - *yes pray* - Rebecca is all right. I pull out the cross she gave me and squeeze it tight, squeeze tight my eyes and try to find her across the myriad connections of the world.

Nothing. It's as if she never was.

Idle flicking through Emma's journal brings me to a passage that reminds me of the conversation we had in the dream: the meaning of a life. She said I'd find it there. Or perhaps I'd scanned it previously, but not really taken it in, that it's a case of cryptamnesia or something, that it fed the dream and nothing more. What's that? You want proof, Lewis? I know you do, but there is no proof, or at least nothing that matters a damn.

The dreaming drives me and I no longer care if it's real or not.

Paranormal?

Yes, by your definition, all of this is paranormal, but so what? Get over it. Redact as you see fit. I trust you'll be fine. You have

your hole in the ground, and I wish you well of it. I have my surface reality, and my dreams. Raul was right about you: there's no such thing as the truth. The truth is simply what you make it. And by you, I mean *you*, Lewis.

Anyway, Emma writes:

Ultimately, there is no point to any of it, other than the realisation of that one fact, that there is no point to the forms of the world - the things, the thoughts, and all the strings of nothing we weave into the great fuss of our lives. Only when we see it as a veil, as an outrageous distraction can we move beyond it, into the finer essence of our selves.

Moving beyond the veil of forms we say "yes", to the embrace of Love. But you can't just say "yes", you have to feel "yes", in your heart of hearts, dissolve the karmic tangles that Love might accept you. Until then, all we have is the fuss of the forms; ephemeral, ever changing, insubstantial, never ending,...

Why do we hesitate to embrace Love? Because to become Love, we must let go of who we think we are - our thoughts, our memories, our precious sense of "self". We are all of us, lost in the woods, looking for the way home for the duration of however many lives we live. But even when we find it, when we know for sure the way,... we hesitate.

Yes, Emma.

Note the capitalisation she uses on the word “Love”. By love, here, she means of course, God.

Something's dawning on me. We've only weeks remaining, haven't we? Tell me Lewis. You know something, don't you?

Wait, what's that? I felt a tingle then, a shiver of something in my bones; something or someone. Rebecca?

Yes.

She's coming back to me.

It was just a false alarm.

Chapter 24

Confirmation of her return comes in the sound of that old air-cooler on the hill. I reach inside my shirt once more, pull out the cross, and I kiss it, then push it back next to my skin. Curious gesture, Timothy? Very Catholic. Except it is not the cross I am kissing, more the priestess who gave it to me.

I kiss her her for not abandoning me.

She pulls up by the Volvo, eases herself down and makes her way stiffly towards me, leaning heavily on her stout old ladies' cane. She's wearing odd shoes again - scuffed canvas flats - one blue, one pink, and I notice a bruise on the shin of her bad leg. It comes to me then that it's all a defence, the way she looks, perhaps even the limp too, unconsciously, that she seeks only to make herself unattractive to men, then she will avoid their attentions. But if that's so, why does she go out of her way to be with me?

Simple, Timothy - it's not her *physical* being she wants you to see but her immortal inner self.

She gives me a look - tense, embarrassed. What's that about? I can deny it all I like but we *did* share a dream last night, one that became fleetingly erotic. It's the only thing that makes sense of this moment. She thinks it was real.

I resolve not to mention it, nor even to think about it.

But how to break the ice?

Humour Timothy:

"For a minute there I thought you'd run off with my dad's watch."

"Oh? Is that why there were cops all over the supermarket?"

"Cops?"

"Two guys fighting over bread. Hurling abuse at the staff."

"Really? You're kidding. There's a bread shortage?"

"The van broke down, according to the checkout girl, so they were late stocking up."

"That answers that one then. I was wondering what people would do if they thought they'd only a few weeks left before the planet was wiped out - I mean if they'd sit down and embark on some accelerated course of self awareness,... or,... "

"Or if they'd just fight over the last of the bread?"

"So what did the cops do?"

"Tasered them both, tie-wrapped their hands and feet and carted them away like a couple of trussed up hogs."

"You're joking!"

"I know, sounds extreme, but it's what the checkout girl told me."

She shows me her carrier bag. *I was not running away,* she's saying. I was merely shopping. But I can read her, and I know she was running, running from what happened in her dreams. And they need not have been the things I'm thinking of, more a lucid nightmare all of her own. I remember my first lucid experience, decades ago, how it left its mark upon me, rendered me dazed and disorientated for weeks.

That may be what we're looking at here.

So tread lightly, Timothy.

"Anyway, now we've more bread than we need," she says. "And at least a month's supply of proper coffee - better than that instant stuff you drink - plus four bars of Cadbury's Fruit and Nut, and there are three boxes of a very strong, very fruity red wine in the van. The fewer times I have to drive up and down that twisty hill the better. Plus, if I've only got a couple of weeks left, I might as well have a bit of luxury."

She limps past me as I sit there and her skirt brushes my cheek. It feels soft, thin. I want to bury my face in it, in her belly, have her rest a hand upon my head and bless me. It's a strange thought - urgent, primeval in a way, but also gentle - a man's need for a woman, for the feel and the touch of a woman. Raul was right about that. I can deny it all I want.

He was right about the Tasers too.

Heaven forbid they should ever get guns.

There is a newspaper in her bag, one of the less sensational rags. I draw it out as she passes. The headline is something about an MP arrested on fraud charges. I dig deeper: more fraud, defence cuts,.. dig deeper, deeper: NHS cuts, ditto railways and the police. Cuts, cuts, cuts. The spectre of declinism. Hell, if you believed all that you'd think we were ruined and a collision with an asteroid was the least of our problems.

Before I know it I'm in the business section, which talks paradoxically of the green shoots of recovery - presumably as an incentive to make me invest my inheritance in the stock market. Damn,... I'll feel pretty stupid for not making better use of that

money if it turns out we are all going to die.

Sorry Mum, sorry Dad.

There's no mention of the asteroid, which puzzles me; I'd been sure it would be on the front page this morning. But that's just the mood of the dream carrying over into ordinary waking reality. Perhaps it's mentioned in one of the more down-market papers. But how down-market should I go? If I searched the Internet conspiracy forums I'd be sure to find something that predicts our imminent demise. The truth, at least of the moment, is whatever we choose to make it, and to the insane, or the merely bored intellect, any old thing will do.

That's all it is, then: I'm bored, and looking for transformation in annihilation, courting Shiva, Goddess of destruction again. But I have to admit "the green shoots of recovery", does not sound like the end of the world.

And Emma did say none of this is necessarily true.

Not literally at least.

I'm almost disappointed.

"I hope you've got plenty of cash," she calls back. "I've just tried every hole in the wall in Windermere and they're all broken."

"I have a little."

What's that? ATMs not working? Could that not be the start of something? I mean, how would you stop a run on the banks these days? Shut the ATM's down, release a statement saying it's a security measure and nothing to worry about. Then they'd put a stop to Internet bank transfers. After a while the system would come up again, but intermittently, and they'd ration our withdrawals, regardless of the size of our accounts, but to what? Twenty quid a day? So much for my savings then, Lewis, if you can deny my access to them so easily!

She's setting the bag down in the kitchen, takes the paper from me when I offer it back. I'm trying not to give away how pleased I am to see her. "Sorry,... I was just checking on that asteroid."

"I already looked. No mention of it is there?"

"No. It looks like we're safe then."

"You think so? You think they'd tell us if we weren't?"

"I don't know. Why wouldn't they?"

"What good would it serve? Kinder not to let us know - though that won't be why we're not told anything. Kindness, I mean. It'll be more to do with the fact that there's not enough room for everyone

in the little holes they'll be digging for themselves right now."

Holes? It was me who first thought of that image - holes going deep underground, deep caverns, down where the earth is warm, and where we could crawl like insects for our salvation, fed on worms and starved of dreams.

"And I thought *I* was cynical. But, seriously, what if you knew for certain it was coming, and what if you knew that, as near as makes no difference, we'll be sitting right underneath it here; wouldn't you want to take a chance on getting to the other side of the world?"

She gives me a sceptical grin. "You're serious?"

"Emma told me about it last night. At least I think she did - or I may not be remembering it right."

She looks surprised, then disappointed. "You dreamed of Emma last night?"

"Yes. We,... talked a little."

What's that, Timothy? Is it guilt? But a man cannot be held responsible for courting his muses in the dreaming. Rebecca is not your wife, and understands that, surely? Even when married to the girl of the your dreams, it shall not stop the muse from demanding her fill of you.

"Then,... you didn't dream of me?" she says. "I mean,.. I dreamed of you,... I just thought, maybe,..."

"You dreamed of me? Really? Well, I dreamed of you too, before I met up with Emma. But getting back to the question, wouldn't you want to get away from here?"

She notes my change of subject, joins in with it, but reluctantly as I can see how much she wants to pursue the idea of shared dreaming. "I'd stay. I have coffee, and chocolate and lots of red wine. What more does a girl need? But you dreamed of me too, *really*?"

"Yes, but I'm not telling you any more."

"And you were lucid?"

"Yes,... but it doesn't mean it was really you in my dream. We shouldn't talk about it. *We can't break Emma's rules.*"

"But,... I dreamed of you and you seemed very real to me. What were we doing? Can't you tell me? Come on, Tim, share your side of the dream with me."

"It *wasn't* a mutual dream. I didn't prepare at all. It was *just* a dream. We might have dreamed *of* each other, but not *with* each

other."

She's looking agitated, now. "Why so reluctant? How can you be sure? It felt real. It felt like I was really with you. It was *you*, Tim. It was *really* you. I know it was. You think I wouldn't know the difference?"

"It wasn't me. But it sounds like you were lucid, and that's good. Sometimes it happens when you've been reading about it. You're obviously a natural. Others have to work at it. You should be pleased."

"But you were *real*. I know you were," she persists. "You talked to me like you're talking now,... and you felt, so,...."

"No! Mutual dreaming is a myth. There's never been a shred of reliable evidence."

What?

What kind of half-assed shaman am I to talk like this? Do you call the Sufi's and Tibetan adepts liars?

What I'm saying, Lewis - about the evidence I mean - it isn't strictly true, but I don't want to share *that* with Rebecca, given the degree of need I sense in her. She really wants it to be true, and that kind of hunger brings with it all manner of distortions. And what did she mean *I felt real*? We did touch then,.. but,... what part of me are we talking about?

No,... don't get sucked into the delusion of it, Tim. She dreamed *of* you. She might even have dreamed of making love to you, which would explain her embarrassment, but it doesn't mean it really happened as either of you remember it.

She looks out through the rear glazing. It's the same layout as at the front of the cabin - a large triple glazed panel that slides open and gives way to a deck from where you can view the pine forest as it descends the fell. But she's not seeing the forest, nor the fells, nor the infinity of billowing sky; she's seeing the lake.

I know she is.

Her eyes are filling. "Tim,..."

I'm desperate we shouldn't pursue this path - as desperate as she seems to want to take it. But what if she's right? What if it's true?

God help me, I don't know.

ll I know is it breaks my heart to see her cry.

But if we accept the reality of it, if we ask questions of each other's dream and we come up positive?

What then?

"We can't, Rebecca. We have to let it go. The dreaming is too strange. We can't let it unpick our reality. *This reality.* In the dreaming things aren't literal. It would be a mistake to read them that way."

But her jaw is set and she's not looking like she wants to give ground on it. Try another change of subject then: "Look, Emma told me last night to take a chance on escape, to take you with me, that no one has any knowledge of a time beyond this one, that we're all wiped out, at least those of us capable of a transition into the dreaming, that it's only the unimaginative, the scientistic, who are spared, that we risk, through them, becoming a race of robots, biological machines, adept at surviving - like cockroaches - but incapable of dreaming. How am I to interpret that? Literally? Or figuratively?"

"I don't know," she says. "You've just said we can't let dreams unpick reality. They're too strange to be read literally."

"I know. Sorry,... I'm a poor guide to the next world."

"Then, maybe we should do as she says. Get on a plane and go. I mean, right now, get ahead of the herd, before there's an announcement and we have to stand on heads to get on a flight. Or we drive Rosy over to the coast, then a ferry to the continent and drive all the way to China if we have to. Except,...

"Except?"

"My dreams are telling me to stay, Tim. This place is idyllic. I'd rather die in paradise and freedom than live in hell and slavery, like we do. And in the world that's coming things can only get worse for the likes of us. And I thought you were for staying too. You told me something about reading and dreaming and thinking, up here in your mountain retreat. I was so impressed by what you said. If you've changed your mind, that's up to you, but would you let me have your keys to this place before you go? I'd like to stay if you don't mind, alone if I have to. I'll swap you the keys for Rosy. You can sleep in her when the roads are all grid-locked with fleeing refugees. I'd hate that. I'd feel trapped. I'd hate to be a part of the last panic. And in choosing to stay I'd be exercising perhaps the one real choice I've ever had in my life. And besides,...."

"Besides?"

"They have those spiders in Australia that live in toilets and bite your bottom."

I laugh, as much in relief at the humour dancing once more in

the crinkles at the corners of her eyes."They do?"

"Of course,... everyone knows that."

She's smiling again. Is it always like this, I wonder? Were couples weighing up the pros and cons in such a detached way and with a twist of humour, when the V2's were falling on London? Except, all of this is nonsense. We're extrapolating Armageddon from our dreams, when in fact everything is probably going to be fine. We are a pair of overworked and totally stressed out teachers, decompressing into fantasy.

What we really need is cheering up.

There's a softness about her this morning, and the redness in her eyes makes her seem all the more vulnerable. There's not going to be a resolution here. The dreaming is the dreaming. It does not dictate outcomes, but informs them. How can it not? I mean if she unzipped me now and slipped her hand inside my trousers, I'd be less surprised than I normally would, on account of already having rehearsed it in the dreaming. But she's unlikely to do that, isn't she?

She turns back to me then, something defiant in her look. "If I asked you to, Timothy, would you do something for me?"

"Sure."

Her chin puckers and she opens her arms, inviting an embrace. "Can you just hold me for a moment?"

Chapter 25

I'm thinking now that if there's even a slight chance we're going to be colliding with an asteroid in a few weeks time, and even if we're not - I've a month's salary I intend spending, to say nothing of a quarter of a million in inheritance sitting in the bank, which I presume is why I'm holding open the door of the Half Moon inn for Rebecca to enter. It's not a tourist stop, this place, more a farmers pub that serves a queer yeasty ale, but otherwise decent fayre. I'm not saying the food's expensive here, but a man has to start somewhere.

It's lunch-time. The sky is leaden, the rain tipping down. She has the newspaper over her head for a makeshift umbrella - the news all drenched out of it and useless now. The memory of our embrace returns to me as I watch her shake the paper out and slip off her raincoat. She's just tall enough so the top of her head fits under my chin, her face, snug against my neck, her hair smelling fresh of a jasmine scented shampoo. Stillness. Eyes closed. Hearts beating. Rebecca Rayworth, Rita Hayworth, the Reverend Becky, and me, breathing together, both of us quivering a little with each inward breath - a deep hurt trying to surface, but not yet buoyant enough to rise.

At some subliminal signal, we separate into shy smiles, she also into dimples - innocent and lovely, but it has rendered us closer now. I feel her as we move, I catch her scent more intimately upon the air that separates us. That embrace, earlier, taught me the feel of her - something hot and vital, also marshmallow soft. From now on I shall always be wanting to hold her like that, but this is a secret thing, the first sparking of a more physical attraction, and I wonder if she feels the same.

I order drinks at the bar, ask the girl for menus while Rebecca chooses a table. The girl looks familiar to me - young, big bosomed, red lips. Perhaps she served me last time I came in here. When was that exactly? How long ago now? I wish I could remember because she's looking at me like we're friends of old, and I'm welcomed back into the fold of her acquaintance. Unsettled, unable to read the augurs, I return to Rebecca who has chosen for us a quiet corner by the fire.

A man, a woman, and a table. My entire life seems punctuated

by these events, the distinctions being if the woman is smiling or not, or if she's looking away, even when she's looking at me,... saying nothing even when she speaks. Tired endings, misunderstandings, the dark trivia of a long intimacy.

Yes, I'm talking about Miranda now.

I wonder if she still smiles at him, and means it.

But surely smiles are for beginnings, such as this, and not just smiles; Rebecca's eyes do not leave me; they remain fixed upon my forehead as if the meaning of her life were written there - the liquid hazel haze of them a pool for me to swim in. If I did not know better I'd say she was flirting with me, using her wiles to win my heart, or that she was hopelessly besotted, like a teenage girl - her eyes full of Moon, like Jannice Iddon. Perhaps I should not have embraced her. Perhaps I gave away too much in that moment.

"Where are we?" she asks.

"Fairford - a couple of miles out of Penrith."

"Tucked away."

"Yes."

"I'd never find this place again in a million years. You know the Lakes really well. Doesn't it make you wonder - all that intimate knowledge of a place that's going to be wiped out soon?"

"Wonder?"

"At the point of it?"

Ah,... the metaphorical asteroid again; existential stuff. "I don't suppose it matters. All knowledge is like that - ultimately pointless."

Or,.. do we really believe this is going to happen, now, or then again have we drifted into a kind of philosophical role play? We should be careful what we expect, for I've found the universe has a way of obliging. I expected the disintegration of my marriage, accepted the bored uselessness of it, and that is what I got. But can I really bring about the end of mankind by the same means? Surely others must have a say in it too? Surely the reality we dream of is a consensus thing? And most of us alive today wish to remain,... alive.

How alive are we though?

I mean really?

"And the kids we've been teaching all year?" she asks. "What was the point in that, when most of them will be dead a month from now? All that Religious and Moral Education, and all that,... *ughh*, Steinbeck."

"Oh? You don't like Steinbeck?"

"Well, do you?"

"I'm very fond of him, actually - just tired of teaching him. As knowledge imparted I suppose there's no point whatsoever in anything we teach. But meaning is never in the past or the future, or in the forms, is it? It's not in the things we see or feel. It's always in the moment, in the mood of it. Every day, every moment is an opportunity to find the mood in which we're most inclined to say 'yes'."

Is this me speaking or is it Emma?

"Yes to what?" she asks.

"Hmm? Oh,.. to Love."

She blushes and I want to hasten in, to reassure her I'm not talking about human love, but something more spiritual, something chastely divine, like the congress of angels born of perfect form. It would ruin the moment though, so I hold my tongue and feel myself blushing deeply too.

"And if we never find it in us to say yes?" she asks.

"We go on until we do."

"Except we'll all be dead soon."

"Technically, I suppose. But I'm not sure about death any more. Not sure it's all it's made out to be."

She cracks a grin. "You're not banking on an afterlife are you? That really is a bit last chance saloon."

"Oh? I thought the Reverend Becky would agree. Me? I've seen enough of the dreaming to form a fair idea of what the afterlife might be like - or at least a part of it, what the new-agers would call the Summerlands. What would you say?"

"The Reverend Becky's supposed to say you're talking bollocks. She was taught to teach a literal interpretation of an unremittingly turgid literature to an unimaginative rabble. Trouble is the rabble aren't so unimaginative any more. They're prepared to think like you, to follow the word of dream tripping weirdos like you. And therein lies the dilemma of Becky's faith, because she's inclined to think like you as well these days."

"That's unfortunate."

"Oh?"

"This weirdo's looking to the Reverend Becky to show him the way out of his own dilemma."

"Well, your Summerland sounds very nice. It doesn't sound like

much of a dilemma to me if you can believe in it strongly enough to make it happen."

"Except what would be the point of it? A world where you can make anything true? How long would you last without boundaries. You'd simply dissolve."

"Same problem with the idea of Heaven," she says. "A case of the blind leading the blind then." Rebecca has already drained her glass. She sets it down now and twirls the stem thoughtfully. "Perhaps we can help each other point out the absurdities of one another's system, and see what remains."

"Perhaps we can. Another drink?"

"Hmm? Oh,... you know me? Same again please. It's as well we've not got long to live. I'm well on the way to becoming an alcoholic." She slides her glass to me and hands over the menu. "I'll have the soup. Unimaginative choice, I know, but nothing else really inspires me."

It's when I return to the bar that I spy Whittaker in a booth with a lady I take to be his wife. Then I remember his wife is dead, and feel the shiver up my spine that lets me know I've been duped into going along with something that is not real.

Again.

Dreamshock!

How the hell did that happen? And *when* did it happen? One minute I'm hugging Rebecca, and the next,...

I look back to our table to see her now in conversation with a lanky middle aged bloke. He has slicked back hair, wide-set eyes and a high forehead, and has pulled up a chair. I should be grateful, I suppose he has not taken mine. I feel the room sway. It had all been so calm a moment ago, and now I'm in danger of losing control of my own reality. Where did he come from? And is he part of me, or Rebecca?

No, wait,... Tim. You're making that leap again, assuming you're dreaming *with* Rebecca, instead of merely *of* her.

But nothing else makes sense of this moment.

Sorry, Lewis, it must be hard to keep up. I set a scene, paint in all the details, then wipe it out end tell you there's no such place - this homely crackly glow, this mythical fold of an English village, lost in time, some time in the 1950's. There is no Fairford and though the Half Moon inn seems perfectly familiar, and comfortable, I've never been in it before. Indeed I've no memory of

where we are, or how we got here. This is not a problem of course; dreams are dreams after all, but for now this dream has robbed me of any recollection of what happened to Rebecca and me before lunch, and that's awkward. In short, my dear fellow, where are we sleeping? Did we take an afternoon nap perhaps, the pair of us collapsed in separate chairs? Or did that hug work itself up into a steam of passion and this is now our mutual post coital oblivion?

Heaven forbid we went that far!

How are we sleeping, Lewis?

Text me the answer, dammit!

But for now I'm troubled by the stranger, thinking he might be her dark stalker, sneaked in while my back was turned. Yet his presence brings with it an atmosphere of fun - something sparkly and puckish, not unlike Raul, or indeed Rebecca herself in her better moments. And she certainly seems to be enjoying talking to him.

Where are my girls, my Dakinis?

Already here.

There are two in the corner booth. Two coming from the ladies room, two just entering through the door. The seventh? Ah! The girl behind the bar winks at me - that's where I knew her from! They seem untroubled, so I relax, realise I am still in control. Then I realise who the stranger is and find myself laughing, more so that Rebecca is still so lost to the dream she has no idea.

Oh, I know, Lewis; sometimes I wish I didn't dream this way, that I dreamed like others do, without awareness of their dreams as they dream them. And in spite of what you might be thinking, there's little sense to be made of things here. As I've said to you before, one of the earliest conundrums I faced was the nature of the dream characters. At first you think you're just making them up, but if you treat them that way, as if they were somehow not real, they take offence, become fractious, unhelpful, even afraid or upset. But if you treat them like you would any ordinary person, with kindness and respect, they open up, become helpful, become *meaningful.* How can they not be real then, at least in some sense?

They are what might have been called in other times the *Faery*, Lewis.

Do I believe in the Faery?

You bet I do!

It's just this impersonation business I don't understand. We must

each draw what conclusions we can from it. For myself I accept them as real, while bearing in mind they might not be, bearing in mind also that what we think of as real may be an inadequate description anyway.

Clearer now?

Then please explain it to me because I haven't a fucking clue.

I give the girl my order, take a breath then return to our table. The guy feigns to know me, and offers his hand in greeting.

"Hallo Tim," he says. "Good to see ya." He speaks a casual American drawl and his grip is firm. His eyes are playful, their exaggerated movements forming punctuation marks to his speech.

"Em,... good to see you too, Fred. No need to get up. Won't you join us for lunch?"

He winks at Rebecca who, if I'm not mistaken, is blushing like a teenager. "No, but thank you. Heard you were in town, that's all, so I thought I'd drop by. Gotta dash. Maybe see ya later, Becky?" His eyes widen to form a question mark.

Rebecca nods, but doesn't look too sure. She's tapping a business card on the table now, looking distracted, but unaware as yet that she's dreaming - always assuming I'm not just dreaming the fact that she's here with me dreaming - but we've been through all of that, and you'll just have to roll with it because I've no answers for you and you're either with me by now or you're not.

She slides the card over. "Do you know him?" she asks.

"Frederick Astor. Dance." I struggle to suppress a smile. The universe is not without a sense of humour. I do hope I remember all of this when I wake. I'll be laughing at it for days. "Em,... yes, he's a regular,... of sorts."

"He was telling me he has a dance studio in the village hall, next door, and would I like to try out some moves with him."

"Really? That's good of him."

"Oh? You think so you do you? Well, I think he has a bloody cheek! And I know we're not together, you and I Tim, and I don't expect you to fly into a fit of jealous rage or anything, but I do expect you to defend my honour, and failing that at least wipe that smirk off your face."

"But you've got him all wrong. He's definitely into dance,... and very good too. And when he says *moves* I'm sure that's exactly what he means. *Dance moves*. We could check it out, if you like. I'll come with you. I could be your chaperone. I'd like to see you dance."

Frederick Astor? Fred Astaire? Get it, Lewis? Where did he come from? Well, this is the dreaming, is it not? We talked about him the other night. I think that's really neat. Unfortunately however, Rebecca doesn't.

"I don't know," she says. She's forgotten about her leg, and that's good, but she really doesn't sound keen on this idea, which is a pity - and peculiar too because I thought the whole point of this was for her to dance. And what finer teacher, choreographer, and partner could our imaginations provide?

So, what's with her resistance?

Well, what's with yours Timothy?

I realise she walked in without a cane, and I'm not about to remind her of that in case she either wakes up, or becomes lucid. It's better while she doesn't know she's dreaming, which she doesn't of course because I'm inventing her, but the dream has convinced me of the opposite, in spite of myself,...

The opposite Lewis?

That Rebecca and I really are dreaming lucidly, together.

I know, I've said it's not possible, but just go with it for now. The possibility, I mean. I'll reject it soon enough on waking, but just for now, let me roll with it.

Anyway, things are calmer, and I'm thinking the longer she remains unconscious the smoother the ride will be. If she wakes up of course, I'll lose her. My mission is clear then; whatever happens, I have to get her into that dance studio, before I wake up.

"Who's that guy in the booth?" she asks. "You seem to know everybody here."

"Em, that's John Whittaker - runs a nice little bookshop in Penrith. It's closing down unfortunately. We could go if you like, I mean while we're so close. He's the one who gave me Emma's journal. His dad must be looking after the place today - lovely old fellah. We may find some bargains."

"Books?" she wrinkles her nose. "Nah! I'm slowly getting rid of mine. Going digital. Aren't you?"

"Em,... partly, though I still like the feel of a book. And the smell. The mustier the better."

I'm laying a smokescreen, trying to distract her from her reluctance to dance, thinking I might reintroduce the idea later, when her guard is down. And I'm thinking: Fred Astaire and Rita Hayworth, perfect! They starred in *You'll never get rich*, in 1941, and

You were never lovelier, in 1942. Both musicals, both somewhat corny by today's gritty standards, and if all that's true, and not just something I'm making up, as I dream it, what does it mean?

It must mean *something!*

"Tim?... Tim,... move your elbow, the lady can't put your soup down."

"What? Oh,... sorry."

Soup. Broccoli, creamy Stilton cheese and bacon. *Aromatic*. A generous wedge of bread and a knob of tasty butter. Where am I remembering all of this from? The look, the feel, the taste. And *why* am I remembering it?

You were never lovelier? Plot please, Lewis,... text it to me now, dammit,... I don't remember if I ever saw it myself. And what about *You'll never get rich*? Astaire played a theatre manager or a choreographer in that one, didn't he? Hayworth was a girl in the chorus line. Something there, possibly, except I may be looking at this all wrong. After all, we've been to the pictures to see Hayworth in Gilda and what had the plot of that movie to do with anything?

Nothing!

No, this is simply about Rebecca dancing again. Get her on the floor with Astaire and the village hall will transform into the London Palladium, or a Hollywood studio. She'll tap, dance, sing, shimmy. This is what she wants? *It's why she's here!*

But then again,... why so reluctant? Has she forgotten her desire? Or am I tarnishing it? Is the reluctance coming from me? And why wouldn't it, since this is my dreaming of her and not the other way round?

No, wait. Think about it, Tim: if she does dance, how's she going to feel when she wakes up in the morning, still with the memory of a virtuoso performance, partnering one of the greatest stage and screen dancers who ever lived, then realising her leg's useless and she still can't stretch far enough to pull her knickers on?

Except, she *can* stretch. You've seen her. The limp is hysterical. The doctors have told her so. She limps as a defence, and you can cure her of it Timothy. When the source of illness in is the mind, so is the cure. But people have difficulty believing in themselves, so they look for others to believe in.

And she believes in you.

I could try a little Qigong healing, I suppose. I've been feeling the energy in my own body quite strongly of late, feeling it moving

as I push it about with my mind. Who's to say I can't push some of it into Rebecca - fill the hole that someone left behind in her soul.

Or do you just want to push your sex into hers, fill up that gap between her legs?

Is that it?

Woa! Where did that one come from?

Sorry, Lewis. This is beginning to sound a little crazy, a little out of control. I'm shooting off at tangents. I'm going to wake up if I'm not careful.

"Rebecca?"

"Sorry, Tim. Excuse me a sec, will you? I just need the loo. Be right back."

"Sure."

I wait for her return, watch as her soup cools and congeals, and I know she's gone, that she's not coming back, that she's either woken up or slipped sideways into another dream, one in which there is no place for me. Perhaps she read my mind, picked up on that spurious thought of me thinking about sex.

With her.

Stupid.

No wonder she left.

What's the matter with you Tim? You've not thought of sex in years. But now, since getting mixed up with Rebecca, you're thinking about it all the time. Well, I'm not the only one. She's just as bad - mentions it at every turn, and then there was the dream last night. And there's another thing you're thinking: you're thinking you really did just sit at this table with Rebecca's dreaming self. And the only thing worse than that is the thought that in a moment you might wake up in Rebecca's arms, the pair of you naked and sweaty. And either of those two things would change everything, wouldn't they?

Which would you choose Tim? Think quickly now, the dream's fading, your vision whiting out,...

Chapter 26

Morning again. And rain. The windows are beaded with it, the fells lost to a blur of grey while mists writhe in the grip of sleepy pines that fall away into the valley. I wake alone, feel the relief in my aloneness at least, then feel the disappointment in an empty bed, the emptiness of being without a woman, then relief again my dreams were not floating on the sleep of a post-coital blackness, that I did not make love to Rebecca. That I did not dream with her. Or wake with her.

Confused, Lewis?

Me too.

I'm beginning to think it is the natural state for all human beings - this permanent storm of confusion.

Focus now, Timothy, swing your legs over the side of the bed, feel the floor with your toes. That's right; it is the only certainty sometimes. Beyond that all we can do is get dressed, pee out one's aching bladder, shuffle downstairs for coffee, clean one's teeth and see what the day brings.

Rebecca leans heavily on her cane as she gazes out of the rear facing window, her forehead leaning upon the glass, her breath fogging it in the shape of a butterfly. She wipes it with the sleeve of her dressing gown. Her gown is open, alarmingly careless, exposing a floral print tee shirt that just about covers her modesty, with hints, now and then, of a pair of white pants underneath.

I see the length of the scar. It must have been pinned with an exoskeleton for a while. I've read how some breaks cause the leg to shorten, and how you have to stretch it back out with machines. I cringe at the thought of it - a dancer; lithe, powerful, expressive in all her moves, now unable to move with any sort of grace at all. Except that's not true, there's still a grace about her, but it's muted, constrained, like a symphony in a tin box, longing for freedom, longing for its full voice once more.

Touch her Tim! Send her some healing though your palms. *What's that? I don't really believe in that sort of thing?* No matter. She believes in you, and Raul spins a good yarn, so it might just work.

We've both slept in a little and it's mid morning again. I have on my jogging bottoms and a stupid Yin Yang Tee shirt, ready for my usual morning practise. I look like an ageing Tao bum. Normally, I

wouldn't care how I look of course, haven't thought of it in ages - but suddenly I do. I'm no oil painting, but we can all find ways of making the best of what we've got.

And I want to, for Rebecca.

I want her to want me.

What ever for, Timothy?

She turns and looks at me. Her hair is unbrushed, her cheek still creased from the pillow. She doesn't mind me seeing her this way: ungroomed, intimate, exposed, crumpled, just as I don't mind seeing her. Her look sparks in me a rush of compassion. I want to hold her, like I held her yesterday, her head tucked under my chin, her face in my neck. I want to gather her, like the folds of a wound, and hold her close until she heals.

But that was yesterday, and it was a one time thing.

No, there's more to this than compassion, Tim.

You're falling in love with her.

You know the signs: that sense of hopelessness, that whatever it is she possesses you shall never understand, just as you can never resist it. But most of all you cannot remember your life before you first spoke to her.

How can this be? I'm fifty, near as dammit, married for a long time, my romantic life over, ruined, plunged into the timeless blur of a miserable divorce. Yes, it *was* miserable, Lewis - all divorces are, no matter how brave a face you put on them. I'd thought it was over for me. I'd thought I'd known what love was, and that I'd wasted it. But this woman is stirring emotions in me, and not all of them so familiar as I make out, which is making me wonder if I've ever known love at all.

No, I'm not falling in love with her.

Yes you are, Timothy.

But it's just lust, dammit - like the way I'm wanting her tee shirt to lift a fraction more, then I can confirm the panties she wears, maybe even see a shock of that copious bush I'm apparently so fascinated with. She's a woman, same as any other, and easily objectified to a pair of tits and juicy cunt. And I'm a man with a one track mind. Or is it simply that I'm afraid? Afraid to say yes to love, like in the dream. Afraid to admit to the shallowness, and the pointlessness of a life lived without it?

Yes, *love*, Lewis! You see how love makes everything worthwhile? You see how it explains everything? You understand

why it *means* everything?

In Orwell's vision of 1984, Lewis, it was Love that rose against the grey backdrop of your oppressiveness, love that was eventually crushed by it – but we all live in hope, don't we?

"You all right, Tim?"

"Em,... sorry, Rebecca, a little bleary eyed this morning."

She tries to smile, doesn't quite make it: "Me too."

What happened to us? Ah, at last I can call it to mind:

It rained yesterday, rained hard, and she grew bored with reading, retired to her room in the afternoon, to lie down. I tapped on the door shyly in the evening, but she was sleeping, or at least pretending, so I lay down myself and let the night close over us, wash us into sleep once more to the ever present sound of this Cumbrian rain.

Alone, Lewis. We slept *alone*. But I cannot deny this growing intimacy, one that might indeed suggest our future boils down to a man, a woman, and a bed.

I did not invite dreams last night, did not prepare for them, but there's something about Rebecca's presence under this roof that demands them. I'm thinking of that dream now, how close she came to dancing, and how I finished the night waiting for her to return to me, so we could seek out Fred Astor's dance studio in the mythical town of Fairford.

Am I remembering this right?

It sounds so strange, now.

The biggest impression I have from the dream is her reluctance, that she might not have meant any of it, this wanting to dance again. Is that why she's looking so pensive now?

"I hate this weather," she says.

"Rubbish isn't it? Sleep all right?"

She gives a shrug, as if she really doesn't know, gives me an awkward look, then turns back to the window. "I don't remember dreaming."

I hesitate to say this is perhaps a good thing, but I fear she reads it in my eyes. "Things might come back to you," I tell her. "Coffee?"

"I've already made some. It's in the pot. So,... you didn't dream then?"

"Yes. A little."

"Of me?"

"Rebecca,... we shouldn't,..."

"All right, I know,... we shouldn't talk about it." She lets it go, gestures to the rain. "What do you do, when it's like this. Don't you get cabin fever?"

"I always find there's plenty to do."

She rolls her eyes and pulls a face. "I know - lots of *inner* stuff like dreaming and writing and reading and meditating, and,... and,... tai chi. Lots of shaman stuff. But what about when you really don't want to do any of that spiritual crap. What about when you just need to get out of your head for a bit?"

"Flight to Spain?"

"Funny."

"Or a swim?"

"Swim? Is there a pool?"

"The tarn."

"Oh. I'd forgotten that. But,.. in the rain?"

"Why not? Afraid of getting wet?"

"Ha, funny!"

She ponders this for a moment, then allows her mood to lift and accepts the challenge of the day. "All right. Pour me a big shot of coffee while I go and change into my cossie."

Chapter 27

The rain is cold on my back, landing in great oily splotches, and the reeds against my shins feel greasy. The day has me cringing. I've made toast for Rebecca, poured coffee, left them on the counter, and have now ventured out to the tarn ahead of her. I'm in a dilemma over my wardrobe, you see? No swimming shorts, only a pair of little Speedos I've had since I was in my twenties.

I must have possessed a physique more suited to them in those days. I've tried them on in my room, but they make my stuff stand out like a pair of King Edwards, and are barely able to contain my pubes. No, I'm not keen on displaying myself that way. It seems immodest, to say nothing of unflattering, and yes there is a degree of vanity at stake here, as ridiculous as that seems at my age. The alternative is a pair of underpants; but they're not much better - a little longer in the leg, and looser fitting, that's all. So I have put on the underpants and submerged my modesty in the water well before Rebecca appears in her black one-piece.

No, Lewis - not the red. The red is reserved for the dreaming, remember?

She makes her way stiffly, grim faced, struggling with something, until she spies me, then paints on a smile. She dreamed. I know she did. But did she dream the same as me? How can a person inhabit another's dreams, yet dream of being somewhere else?

This is getting complicated.

Don't think about it; we're not solving equations here.

Here we're allowed to be a little more vague in our understanding.

Relax.

Defocus,...

I point out a flat rock from where it's best to slip into the tarn. I wonder if she can make it all right, and watch as she negotiates the stones, then the little embankment and finally the patch of reeds. I'm anxious for her, but she seeks no help, and I'm careful not to offer any. She makes the rock without mishap, flops upon it and with a petulant sigh, discards her cane, then lowers herself in.

She screams.

It's cold - not *that* cold, but there's something in her this morning she needs to let out, and screaming does it for her. The scream is

answered by an echo from the fell tops. It takes her by surprise and she laughs at it, then screams again on purpose, her hand cupped to her ear as she waits for the response.

I don't know if she's okay in the water, how steady, so I swim over, ready to help if she wants me, but stand well back in case she doesn't. She's supporting herself on one leg, bouncing, letting the water and her buoyancy support her.

I think she'll be okay.

"It's about a meter and a half, mainly" I tell her. "Two meters by the rock over there. No other deep bits."

She nods, leans into the water and launches herself with a slow, graceful breast-stroke, then turns onto her back, again slow, graceful. She's transformed, like a mermaid.

"What's with the sneaking off?" she says. "I hope you've got some shorts on under there. I don't want any surprises when you get out."

"I assure you I'm decently attired. My swimwear's a little improvised, that's all. I was embarrassed to let you see me."

"Don't tell me: a pair of Y fronts?"

"Not since my mother stopped buying my underwear. If you must know they're Calvin Klein jersey trunks. Not ideal for swimming. But more room in them than in my old Speedos."

She gives an approving, though slightly sarcastic whistle. "Not bad. But I thought you swam a lot here."

"I do, but usually,... well,... it's very quiet. I usually don't bother fussing about with a costume."

She circles me with an expert half-crawl, and as she swims, she laughs, rolls her eyes flirtatiously. "Skinny dipping? I knew it! You old pervert."

"Less of the 'old' if you don't mind!"

Am I dreaming this? No,.. she's just having a bit of fun, enjoying my embarrassment. Go with it, Timothy; this is what people do - they have fun, sometimes saucy, flirtatious fun; it means nothing.

She gives a theatrical sigh: "Well, I suppose we're both grown ups. I'm game if you are."

"What? Oh,... well, you first, then."

I don't mean anything by this, and certainly don't intend it as a challenge. I pull away to the middle of the tarn. My back is turned for a moment but when I stand and look she's already peeled her costume off and is tossing it at me. It catches me squarely in the face and partially obscures my view of her bobbing breasts. Then

she's swimming, rolling briefly onto her back, before diving. She's incredibly graceful in the water. She's also large breasted - pendulous as she rolls - and there's a great hairy bush, as I suspected - and a beautifully swollen white porcelain derrière, all glimpsed in a millisecond, and playfully,... but never to be forgotten, Lewis.

Ever!

"Your turn," she calls.

"Em,..."

My heart is thumping at what I've just seen, or rather what the universe has just seen fit to reveal to me.

Strange way of putting it, Timothy?

Possibly, yes - but that's how I feel about a lot of things these days.

"Don't 'em' me, Magowan. Get them off. Chicken!" She swims around me, making clucking noises.

I can't.

I know the water is very cold, and a man's equipment is normally prone to reluctance under such circumstances, but the feel of her costume in my fingers now has me tingling with her imagined energy, and I find myself swelling into an embarrassing firmness.

But she's not going to take no for an answer. She dives, comes at me like a torpedo, and is now pretending to tug my makeshift trunks down. I'm astonished by this, by the feel of her arms around my waist, the brush of her fingers and her hair upon my belly, the accidental scratch of her nails on my thighs as she hooks her thumbs under my waistband.

Where the hell is all of this coming from?

No Tim, you cannot take refuge in the dream of it.

This is real!

She can't surface because we're too close, and I would see her breasts and her thighs would be against mine, but that I can imagine all of this is enough and I find the moment exquisitely erotic - especially the view of her derrière rendered impressionist by the ripples on the water. Erotic too is her hair floating, its tentacles reaching out for my waist. It gives the impression of her head very close to the source of my embarrassment, which renders me all the more urgent and straining for,... what?

For her mouth, her fist?

Touch me Rebecca. Like you did in the dream!

The water is warm suddenly; it is silky smooth; it has become a slick vagina, open and inviting, and I feel myself expanding into it.

She breaks the surface suddenly, eyes wide, beautifully big, and cracks a cockeyed grin, then pushes back, taking care to keep herself modestly low in the water. "Timothy Magowan! What's that all about!" She points with her finger.

"What?"

"You know."

"What?"

"That,... cucumber sticking out of your pants."

I look away, ashamed. "I'm sorry. It was a bit of a surprise, seeing you like that. That's all."

She looks abashed now. Hard to believe we're middle aged. We're behaving more like children, *and it feels so good*. "No," she says. "My fault. I'm sorry. I don't know what came over me. Water always makes me playful. Toss me my costume. It was stupid of me. I was,.. I don't know what I was doing,..."

"It wasn't stupid. I've just forgotten how to live outside my own head. Come on, let's swim, or we'll freeze to death."

I do the only thing I can under the circumstances, I slip the trunks off - struggling a little with the cucumber - as Rebecca puts it - and I flick them at her. It means nothing, I'm telling her. Get over it. "Anyway, I'd hardly call it a cucumber. But thanks for the compliment."

"Ha!"

She catches my trunks stretches them out and laughs, but there's something guarded about it, like she knows the sight of me was a statement more honest than anything I've said up to now. I wish I knew what she was thinking,.. I mean, about *that*.

The cold and the further distraction of a duck making an aborted splashdown on my back is enough to deflate me to safer proportions, and it transforms the moment into farce. Rebecca hoots with laughter. Thus, we manage to salvage at least the appearance of things, but my insides are in turmoil. It's one thing thinking you might be in love, because you can always ignore that, but it's quite another to have your passionate self awaken in middle age and insist you do something about it.

The sky darkens as we swim, it grows heavy, then unleashes a warm gush of rain. It's like swimming in the shower. The tarn becomes an abstract place of ripples and droplets and steam, and

the sound of Rebecca laughing, gasping at the shock of it on her skin. We swim, I think, because neither of us wants to be the first to climb out, that for all of our bravado, we each feel a line has been crossed now, and we would rather it hadn't. We would like to rise chaste into voluminous towels, no knowledge of each other's nakedness.

But we brought none.

I lose track of her for a moment and when I next find her she's treading water in the corner of the tarn, by the rocks, just deep enough for her to lose the bottom. She's watching me, thinking - though without her spectacles I realise she cannot see me very clearly, not as clearly as I see her.

"Are you cold?" I ask, but I wonder if she can hear me over the hiss of the rain, if she is deaf as well as blind to my presence, or if she is as intensely aware of me as her expression suggests.

"This is the best summer holiday *ever*, Tim."

"I can always tell when you're being sarcastic: your lips are moving."

She shakes her head, looks so earnestly at me I feel myself stilled and hanging on her next words. "I mean it. *Really,*" she says.

Is she still playing with me? What more can she want in exchange for those warm words? I have already said I'd help her in the dreaming. Don't be fooled, Lewis - she doesn't want a man, least of all me, even though we do seem to be getting on in that way. But I live a strange life, and am becoming more honest in my middle years, and in my experience too much honesty is always fatal for any relationship.

"Tim?"

"You're shivering," I tell her. "And your teeth are chattering."

"I *am* a little cold."

"Should I bring you a towel, then we can go in?"

She nods. "Thank you."

"Okay, no peeking when I get out."

She looks serene, smiling, slow blinking. "We both know that without my specs I couldn't tell your arse from your elbow."

"That's all right then."

But there are other ways of knowing, and I suspect, now, Rebecca knows more of the truth of me than even you, Lewis.

Chapter 28

Ambleside. A small cafe - the kind that relies on hapless punters queuing to place their orders. At busy times in peak season you'll wait half an hour on your feet before ordering coffee, then you take a wooden cube with a number on it to a table where you'll wait another half an hour before your food arrives. Cold. Service is not our strong point and I hope you're making a note of this with a view to improving things in that future country of ours - you know? The one with the big hole in it, right about where I'm standing now.

What makes things worse for the café this afternoon is the electronic reader has malfunctioned so we cannot pay by debit card. Coins must be counted, so, as well as being fleeced for poor fayre, we're also being scowled at by the bastard behind the till if we do not have the correct money. And we feel guilty for it, grubbing about in the fluff of our pockets for the coppers that will please him.

I've brought Rebecca out for a change of scene. I'm thinking perhaps the loneliness of the cabin is better settled into gradually. She has an active mind, and a vivid imagination, but not as much meditative stillness as one might expect from a trained priestess. She gets bored, and when that happens, she slips over to her dark side. Perhaps that's why she didn't finish the divinity course.

We had fun this morning, swimming. I still feel lightened by it, and it's a feeling I don't want to lose by having us sink once more into ourselves, and worse, into our dreams. I'm not ready for another dream, Lewis. I'm also hoping to cover up the other thing that happened this morning, and so covering it, prevent a road from opening and our path veering in ways that could never be helpful.

Yes, I'm talking about sex again. More to the point, I'm taking about having sex with Rebecca Rayworth! God help me. I should have outgrown this kind of thing years ago.

She's beautiful, this woman, and there's such a powerful, sometimes overpowering presence to her. Why did I never notice this before? Amelia Grey, whom I noticed all too often, seems vulgar by comparison,now, rolling her derrière along the corridors for me and Raul to gawp at. How could we have been so crass as to ignore Rebecca's sparkling, jewel-like presence so completely?

Perhaps I'm not being fair; Raul noticed it long ago.

And we have worked next door to each other all year, Lewis.

All year!

How could I not have felt this in her before now?

Still, it's refreshing that life can contain such surprises.

We are five deep into the queue now. An elderly lady has just feigned ignorance, elbowing her way in front of us while looking in the other direction. She's shouting, without a shred of self-consciousness to her husband, across the room. Her accent is home-counties, plummy, authoritative, grating. I wonder if she is a headmistress, primary, old-school, like my aunt. Except my aunt was gracious and mild mannered. She was politeness and dignity personified.

Unlike this ignorant hag.

"What sort of coffee do you want, dear? Latte? Americano? Cappucino? Sprinkles? No they don't just serve *coffee*, dear. You must be more *specific*!"

Tut. Impatient sigh. A quick look round for the sympathy of others at the trials she must endure with her oaf of a mate.

None is forthcoming.

Rather, I pick up on the collective frustration in the café. It jangles, hollow, brittle,... something about to break. Rebecca taps her cane petulantly and blows a stray lock of hair from her face. She's hot, little prickles of sweat beading her hair-line, her spectacles beginning to mist in the corners. I'm thinking she's about to put the old dear straight, but instead she turns to me and says: "This sucks, Tim."

"I agree. Why don't you claim a table before they all go. I'll bring the coffee's over."

"To be honest I can't be bothered with coffee now. Looks like it'll be crap anyway. What I really want is a bag of chips from that chippy we smelled the other night."

"Em,... Okay."

She takes my arm, leans close to balance herself and we make our way outside. But there's a similar queue for chips, so we give up on that as well, make do with little cartons of juice from the newsagents, and begin to stroll aimlessly along the highstreet. Last time we were here, Ambleside had been so quiet we were perhaps expecting the same ease of service today. We should have stayed on the mountain. Even on a Bank Holiday, no one ever makes their way up there.

"Is your leg bothering you?"

"No, why?"

"I just wondered."

She feels different, holding onto me, a shift of balance - closer, heavier, more intimate. But I don't tell her this; I like it; I like her hanging onto me; I like it that she trusts me; I like it that she believes in me.

My phone has buzzed in with texts by now - one from Raul asking if Rebecca got in touch. I make back "yes", but furnish no further details because I know how much it will frustrate him. There's another from Strickland, a reminder about a staff meeting on the 17th - preparation for the new term. I have no intentions of attending it. There's another text from Raul, regarding said meeting, telling me he's not going, and wanting to confirm I won't be there either. I confirm we remain blood brothers in our fight against those who would oppress us.

I feel the tug of Rebecca's arm distracting me from the screen. "The cafe's not the only place having trouble with card readers," she says. "Look."

She indicates the doors of restaurants, trinket shops and walkers' boutiques - printed sheets appearing in the windows, warning of cash-only transactions. I note standards of grammar and spelling vary, and lament the most I could award is a B+. Rebecca laughs as I lift my eyes. She's right, we English teachers are insufferable pedants.

"Looks like it's the banks," I tell her. "It's not the Internet. I still have 3G on the phone. And Google works. Didn't you say the cash machines were out of order yesterday as well?"

"Yes." She points out an ATM across the street. "Looks like they still are. Are you okay for petrol?"

"Half a tank."

"Better save it until things get back to normal, eh? No more random journeys just to pacify my boredom. Sorry, Tim, this was pointless. I promise to grow up, settle down in a corner and read from now on. Or if you have some crayons I could always do some colouring. What do you think this is about?"

"This bank thing? A glitch. It happens,... maybe a security problem - the banks' systems under attack from hackers, so they've shut the whole thing down until they find a patch."

I've really no idea. but I'm a man and must furnish an

explanation for everything, no matter how flimsy. Rebecca has another idea, more sinister, more imaginative: "Or they're trying to stop a run on the banks," she says. "Denying us access to everything but the money we have in our pockets."

I was thinking of a run on the banks myself, earlier, wasn't I? I really must stop this, Lewis. "Why would there be a run on the banks?"

"Everyone wanting their money at the same time, because they're unsettled by these rumours of an asteroid about to wipe the planet out. Come on, wake up, Tim!"

"But it's just stories in the paper. And there was nothing yesterday. The story's gone away. It's going to miss us by a mile and that's that."

She shivers - someone walking over her grave - not me this time. "You think so? Then what is it? There's *something*. Can't you feel it? You must do - sometimes we talk about it like it's real. And look at them: people seem twitchy, fractious. I felt it in the café. Maybe they're all talking about it too."

"I feel something for sure, but I don't know what it is. If we really believed it was true, would we be so calm as this? Why aren't we fractious as well?"

"I don't know. I think we are, underneath, or at least I am. But what if *was* true? I'd almost be glad, I think; glad of the freedom. Just think, if they said we had a month? We could do anything we liked. We needn't think about going back to school for a start." She nods, satisfied. "Sure, a month would do me fine."

"Well, it would be something, I suppose. Maybe that's why they're not saying anything. Society would collapse."

"Would it? Really?"

"No law and order? Men running about all over the place looking for one last good shag? People fighting over bread?"

"But the bread wouldn't matter would it? And like you said, there are no trolls on your mountain - only those we carry up on our backs. So we'd be safe there. And who'd look at me anyway. If it's a good shagging anyone wants they won't be thinking of getting it from me."

She makes light of it, but she *has* thought about it.

A group of men walk three abreast down the pavement, lesser beings spilling into the road. They are big, shaven headed. They wear tee-shirts and shorts, in spite of the rain, so we can see the

warrior tattoos on their legs and arms. I remember the dream of Penrith, with Emma - surely these same men? But they do not doff their imaginary caps to us, and seem quite menacing now.

Unconsciously, Rebecca closes the neck of her blouse. I guide her steps away, find a little paved square with benches, and we sit down. The men track us with their eyes. It's her they're looking at - perhaps curious about her lameness, perhaps thinking of other things. And yes, Lewis, I know most of this is imagination. But I ask myself this: could I defend her, if I had to? Not a chance; not from men like that. I'd need to be vigilant, and a step ahead all the time, and of course, like she said, we'd be much safer on the mountain, where men like this are never seen.

We settle closer and watch the crowds - her arm still tucked into mine. "How did we end up like this, Tim?"

"End up like what?"

"You and me. The kids would have a fit if they saw us: boring old Magowan and that weird little cripple, Miss Rayworth."

"Well, if you put it like that, I suppose we're not spoiling another couple. As for why we're here, as I recall, it was you who did the asking, and I'm too polite to say no, remember? Women just walk all over me."

She gives me a wry smile: "Must happen all the time. Handsome chap like you."

We're procrastinating, looking for humour to keep us in the shallows, when everywhere we look we see the darkness of the deep ahead of us, and I don't know where it's coming from. Rumours, speculation,... a creeping premonition. What is this, Lewis? What's happening?

"It doesn't actually," I tell her. "I mean, happen all the time."

"Well,... I'm sure I'm making up for it."

"You're welcome, actually. To what's left of me."

"Oh, don't play the pathos card with me, Magowan. I'm sure there's lot's of life in you yet – even someone your age. How old are you? Fifty was it?"

"I'm *not* fifty. Not for a few months. But thanks anyway."

She looks pensive for a moment, her head dropping suddenly. Then she leans close, nudges my shoulder with hers. "I don't want to take off on a tour of the Lakes in Rosy, you know? That was just me talking myself up. I wouldn't have the confidence."

"Oh?"

"I only like being on my own, if I know there's someone I can turn to at a moment's notice, when I'm lonely."

"Me too I suppose."

"I'd like to stick around with you for a while, if that's all right."

This much is plain, Lewis, but her admission of it is quite something, but beyond the dreaming, it doesn't explain much, does it?. I mean, not unless she really likes being with me of course, which is impossible. Or is it? The feeling in my stomach tells me this is something I want to believe in more than anything, and it would be the most wonderful thing were it not for the fact she's already switched moods and is looking pensive again, biting her lip. She's hard to keep up with sometimes.

"I lied to you this morning," she says. "I'm sorry, but I didn't know how best to handle it."

"Handle what?"

She glances away. "I can't tell you - you'll be cross."

"About what?"

"We said we shouldn't talk about the dreaming - that what happens in the dream should stay in the dream. Emma's rules, remember? But I really have to talk about this, Tim."

"Rebecca,..."

"Hear me out. Just tell me this one thing , *one thing,* and I promise not to mention it ever again."

"Okay, one thing only."

"In the dream," she says. "It *was* Fred Astaire, wasn't it?"

Chapter 29

I'm looking away from her, now. I'm wanting to stand, to move, to avoid where this is going, but she's holding onto my arm and wont let go. It's always uncomfortable when we are forced to face a thing we have denied, but know was true all along.

"It *was* true wasn't it?" she says. "It was *him*. I didn't realise it in the dream. I wasn't lucid, you see? But I realised it afterwards, and I could kick myself. And there was something else - you were there, weren't you. I mean really *there*!"

So,...

All right, Lewis, there we have it: shared lucid dreaming is possible. Now, I understand perfectly that from your perspective this is just one more useless anecdote in support of the idea, and the plural of anecdote does not equal "data", as the materialists and the scientistic are fond of bleating. But a man in my position isn't likely to give a fuck about any of that, is he?

Rebecca and I entered the dreaming *together*. I have known this all along, of course, but ignored it, fought against it - ignored my intuition, dismissed it like the worst of the sceptics among you, not wanting to admit to myself that it was possible. I was - still am - afraid of it. I'm afraid of the doors it opens, and of the philosophical implications for the meaning of any of our lives.

Confused, Lewis?

Think about it, man; it puts the dreaming *outside* the bounds of our own heads, puts it in a dimension of its own; it demonstrates that the mind is capable of a psychical existence outside the bounds of space and time. I'll say this slowly for you and in italics:

The mind is not obliged to conform to the limitations imposed upon it by the human brain - that it consents to do so throughout the course of our lives is by far the greater mystery.

We've known this since the sixties, since those experiments with LSD and DMT and magic mushrooms. No wonder you put a stop to that! Better for you if we go on thinking our dreams are the useless artefacts of a sleeping brain, that there is no escape into our dreams, no worthy truths to be gleaned thereby; better for you if we each go on thinking there is no better way to be than this.

No wonder you're afraid of dreamers, no wonder you don't teach it any more. Half the population would starve itself to death, lost in

opium dreams, and all the happier for it, unable to see the attraction of living with the world so grey and empty and illusory as you have painted it for us. We might begin to demand a little more *colour*!

Rebecca gives my arm a squeeze, partly to return me from my shocked reverie, and partly to comfort me. "I can tell from your expression it *was* Fred Astaire, or at least whoever or whatever it was, you saw Fred Astaire too. Same as me." She sighs, looks glum, clearly unhappy with the revelation.

Which makes two of us.

"That's that then," she says. "We *have* been dreaming together. Emma was right. I know I wasn't lucid last night, but I'll try harder. I'll follow Emma's instructions to the letter next time."

But the prospect of taking this any further worries me, has me backing away from it. "This could be really dangerous, Rebecca. Look, I'm not the intrepid dream walker you think I am. I've never done anything like this before. No one has, and those who say they have, frankly I've never believed them. We're into uncharted territory."

"Do you think I'm not scared too? But we don't seem to be able to avoid one another in our dreams. And as for the night before,..."

"The night before?"

"I was lucid then, but not completely myself,... I remember that dream too - the cabin, and the lake, my red swimming costume, and the sun on my back, and I remember everything we said and everything *I* did. And I'm sorry about that. I'm unbelievably embarrassed, if you must know."

"What exactly do you remember?"

She rolls her eyes. "You know,..."

I feel a shiver. Dreams have always been a private thing, no one able to follow me there. They are a place you can't help but be unguarded and at the mercy of what happens. But it never mattered before, because I'd always believed no one could follow me inside and see my madness, see my nakedness, so to speak.

Except Rebecca can, any time she wants.

And Rebecca *knows*.

Distract her perhaps: "Well, like you said, you weren't yourself. But it's not a reliable memory. Do you remember the piranhas?"

"What?"

"I see you don't, and that surprises me, since you created them.

You were afraid the lake was infested with piranhas. One of them leaped out and started snapping at us. Then you ran inside, and in the morning you'd gone."

"Because we needed bread. But,... all right, it's true, I don't remember the piranha thing. But I do remember being,... rather intimate with you. You think I was running away,... from you? Because of that?"

"I wondered."

"Well, maybe I was at first. But I'd calmed down by the time I got to the bottom of the hill, and realised I was still wearing your father's watch."

Okay.

We've gone deep enough for now.

Time to pull out of this nose-dive with a change of humour, and a little test.

I'm laughing. "No wonder you were embarrassed, tying me to the bed like that. I thought I'd had every kind of sex imaginable in dreams, but you certainly taught me a few things even I'd never thought of."

"Shut up. It's not funny. And I didn't do any of that. You're just teasing me. I put my hand in your pants, that's all, and I asked you to undress, as well you know, Timothy Magowan. That's all we did."

And thus, roundly, and with a touch of a scowl, she confirms it for me.

"All right, look, you must see the danger here: something might happen on your side of the dream that doesn't happen on mine, and it might frighten you, but I wouldn't know it, yet you'd be looking at me in waking reality and wondering: *why doesn't he remember? Is he hiding something?*"

"But with practice we might dream more and more things the same."

"Maybe that's so, Rebecca, but in the dreaming we must always be careful about what we bring back with us. And when we dream *together*, we have to be doubly careful. So, what we experience in the dream *must stay in the dream*. We must never talk about it. Ever. We must always assume it's *not* a mutual dream, even though it might be."

"I don't agree, Tim. But,... all right. I promise. If it means you'll still dream with me."

I don't believe her for a minute. We're both of us standing on the

edge of the jungle, a million ways to go wrong, a million creatures that will eat us alive, and an all encompassing half-light that prevents us from seeing clearly. All we have to go here on are the ravings of loons.

Like me.

And Emma.

"Do you still want to dance?" I ask.

"Of course."

"But,.. there, you see? I don't think you do. There's a resistance in you. I can feel it now. It came through in the dream last night. You had the perfect opportunity to dance with Fred Astaire, and you walked out on it. You didn't trust him. And you didn't trust him because you didn't trust your self."

She looks away, stung. "You said we shouldn't talk about the dream."

"I know. Impossible isn't it? Rebecca, tell me what you want from me. Really."

"I want to dance, like I told you. But,... all right, since dreaming with you I've been wondering,... how I'd feel being able to dance in the dreaming then wake up and fall over because I've forgotten I need my stick all the time. Would it not just make me feel worse?"

"So,... what's so important about the dreaming any more? Is it better not to go there? Better not to leave it? Better not to dance at all?"

"Okay, okay,... so this is obviously something I'm working on right now. But not to dance? Is that not the coward's way? I'd rather live my life and be labelled crazy, or driven crazy than hunker down and be bored, or boring. And it seems to me a door's been opened to us, a doorway into a remarkable way of experiencing both the inner and the outer worlds. It's like the parable of the talents, Tim - do you remember your bible stories? Do we simply acknowledge their existence, keep them safely hidden, and essentially do nothing with them? Or do we take a risk? My teachings say we take a risk, my teachings say if our hearts are in the right place, we should not be afraid to fail, nor should we feel guilty if we do."

I don't like it that she quotes the bible at me, at least not so wisely as this, for in my own teachings it is the same. And no one likes being called a coward.

She takes a breath. "Will you let me believe in you, Timothy?"

"Believe?"

"That you can cure me, like you cured Raul. I mean really - not just in the dreaming. If it's in my head, like they say, then you can do it. But I have to believe in *you*. And I can. But first you have to believe in yourself. You mustn't be afraid of me, or anyone, or anything. You have to be magnificent for me. It doesn't matter that you don't know everything. It doesn't matter if you don't know *anything* at all, so long as you believe you can do this one thing, for me, and not be afraid to fail."

"But I'm afraid of everything. I think you picked the wrong Shaman."

"No, I didn't. I picked the one I was led to. And that makes him the right one, even if he is a charlatan. But nothing I've seen so far has shaken my trust in you."

"Rebecca, I'm flattered, really, but you're forty, em, something and you've not danced for over a decade. Even with a full, miraculous cure - and with the greatest respect - I think the West End is aiming a little high."

She laughs. "Don't be an ass. I know that. The West End's for the dream time. For waking reality, I was thinking more of the Fresher's Ball, at school. It's in September. Oh, dance with me, Tim? And before you say you can't, I'll teach you. Picture it: we'll arrive together. Me in a long ivory dress, slit up to here, pale stockings to hide my scar - because, clever boy, you were right about that. And you in a dark Tuxedo, looking like my very own James Bond. Let's show them what we're made of. Let's show them how cool and how mysterious and magnificent *we* are. Because together we can do *anything*, Timbo."

That moment arrives when I wonder if I'm dreaming. With Rebecca it's often hard to tell. I think it's her background, her experience of life - showgirl, divinity student, teacher; she's seen so many things, done so many things, her waking reality must at times have been as bizarre and vivid as her dreams. And sometimes that spills over into the things she says,... which seem to me at times surreal, but always breathtaking.

Never boring.

"Well,... I'm no Fred Astaire, but okay, I'll dance with you."

"You will? Oh, that's the spirit!"

"But,..."

"Ah, no buts. Please no buts."

"You're forgetting something; there won't be a September this year."

"Well there won't be if you take that attitude. But if I can dance again, there has to be one, doesn't there?"

"How do you work that out?"

"Otherwise what would be the point?"

I'm trying to follow her line of reasoning – though I accept "reason" is hardly the right word where she and I are concerned. She's saying what? If I can cure her so she can dance, we also save the world? And if I can't, an asteroid punches a hole in the earth and wipes out civilisation as we know it?

"You have the craziest ideas, Rebecca."

"That's what my divinity tutor used to say."

"Is that why you dropped out?"

"Who says I dropped out?"

"I thought you said,..."

“No that was you making an assumption. On the contrary, I came top in my class. I was ordained. I *am* a priestess, as you put it so quaintly. I just couldn't get a parish. The rest you know. I left it on my CV when I applied for the job, thinking it would stand me in good stead, which it did. It nearly back-fired though. Strickland wanted me to wear the uniform, dog collar and all, to go with the sexy business suit - school chaplain, that sort of thing. Sort of a Hollywood vicar in high heels, lipstick and mascara. But it didn't feel right. People look at the uniform and expect a certain kind of thing from it. And I didn't feel I could deliver it. Plus the governors would never have gone for it."

"Why not?"

"Secular school. God’s irrelevant, of course, until someone dies and then they all want a prayer."

"Ha, true."

"So,... *cure me*?"

Her gaze is level, her tone matter of fact. Rebecca is so many things, so many people, so many souls rolled in to one, she makes me dizzy, and in every moment we have shared at least one of those souls has been pushing me out of my comfort zone. No, not pushing me - leading me. Right from that opening dream of the Reverend Becky, pausing by the standing stone in the forest, she has been leading me home.

"All right, I'll think about it."

"Not good enough, Tim. That's what my parents used to say when I was whining for a new Barbie doll, hoping I'd forget."

"I mean it. You're hardly going to forget, are you? But I'll need to take some advice. I'll need to ask Emma."

She nods, but there's something in her expression that betrays an unease. "I'm beginning to understand how your wife felt over Emma. Except this is worse."

"Oh?"

"With a real mistress you can scratch her eyes out. When it's someone in your head, it sort of goes beyond all that."

"Emma's brought us this far."

"I know, and I've been wondering about that too. Wondering what it is she wants with you."

"You sound jealous."

"I am. You're mine, Timbo. Until you tell me to get lost, that is, and I know you're far too polite to do that, so it looks like you're stuck with me. Better get used to it."

As if to challenge me on this she tightens her grip and snuggles up. I think about it, but have not the will to say anything - even in jest. And in not saying it, I am again saying much more than I ordinarily would. But I'll tell you, Lewis: I do not want her to let me go. I do not want to feel alone in the world again. I want her to be my woman. This woman. Rebecca Rayworth, Rita Hayworth.

The Reverend Becky.

Chapter 30

We walk again. I'm quiet now, feeling guilty, thinking myself possessed by her, thinking how much lighter my heart feels for being with her, but unable to share news of this feeling with her for fear of that very possession, fearing too the way she holds my arm, *possessively*. How can I crave a thing so much, on the inward breath, yet fear it on the outward?

We slip back into that rhythm where we move as one. The town gives way to parkland, and the parkland to a little road that skirts the fells below Loughrigg – russet hills rising from a lush green canopy of forest. Grey clouds peel open to reveal streaks of a deep, unsettling blue, while golden beams light the land in fast, dynamic patches, like creatures in flight from a thing unseen but impending. The land purrs, the day warms, and the mood shifts from the pensiveness of a frigid cold, to something richer and more warmly philosophical.

We walk all afternoon. The feel of Rebecca is hot and soft - exquisite as the air on my face. We come down to the Rothay, a stone's throw of a river, fed by the Grasmere lakes. It bubbles along, brisk and jolly, runs black as midnight, and there are stars in it. We find a bridge to cross, then an old hotel tucked away between trees and warm-lit crags. Sunlight renders the ivy-clad entrance in inviting shades of yellow and green.

We wander in for tea and scones. I am wrapped in an ecstasy of childish bliss.

The lounge is quiet, a large screen TV, turned down low, showing the BBC news channel. I'm wary of sitting, wary of dreams sneaking up on me here - so luxurious is the feel of the afternoon - but the deep leather sofas beckon, and the waitress looks nothing like any of my warriors girls, so I accept the continuity of the day, tell myself I am not dreaming, not even when the tea comes and the news flashes to an image of the Prime Minister, looking grave - looking as if he has just declared world war three.

The scrolling caption announces: Breaking News.

The waitress turns the sound up.

"Has something happened?" asks Rebecca.

"It's a statement on this asteroid thing," she replies.

They say you're getting old when the policemen start looking

young. The same goes for Prime Ministers. He's young enough for me to have taught him, looks earnest, though a little too fresh faced for him to carry any gravitas - but that's my age again I suppose; I'd say the same of anyone. Indeed, I suspect only a figure of the stature of a wartime Churchill would cut it for me these days. And such a man would be considered too old of course, and the big tit red-tops would ridicule his soaring oratory, to say nothing of his speech impediment.

Advice from the Astronomer Royal, from NASA, from NOAA - the accepted authorities on such things in the West - no risk of a collision! There will be a close pass, on the 17th, some debris to burn up in the atmosphere, but absolutely no danger; no need to fear; no need to be depressed and so further depress our still faltering economy.

Laugh, dance, clap your hands and sing joyful songs!

The sky is not falling.

"Fuss over nothing then," says the waitress.

She slips away. I detect a tone of relief, as much as expectation, but I'm conscious of what Rebecca said earlier, her scalding cynicism matched only by my own: that we can't believe anything we're told. I'm sorry, Lewis. This may not be the truth of things as they are now, but it has become very much the perception in the world these days. And I am of the cold war generation when we learned never to believe the truth of anything until it had been officially denied.

I realise how isolated I have been these past days, since coming to the mountain. It's ironic I should have distanced myself from the tiresome drone of current affairs at a time when current affairs have become as important as the outbreak of that Churchillian World War. What kind of shaman am I who loses touch with the pulse of his people, because his head is stuck so far up his own arse he doesn't hear the murmurings of their discontent?

And who will save us now?

There are no Churchills any more. What's that, Lewis? *Cometh the hour, cometh the man?* Well, we can live in hope, but I suspect only God can save us now. I wonder if they're pointing nuclear missiles at it, just in case? But wait,... it's all right. These murmurings are only the manifestation of an inner fear. The rock in the sky is in our collective imagination.

Scientists say,...

Blah, blah, blah.

Except, and again I'm sorry, Lewis, but we were once told you did not listen to our private conversations, that you did not scrutinise our emails, or our cloud-based ramblings. It's not that we were ever so naive we did not believe you might do such things - only that you told us you did not. You would have been better saying nothing, for what now are we to believe about anything?

Rebecca looks at me, puzzled. "We're not dreaming this are we?"

"I don't think so."

She sips her tea. "Good. It's just that,... you're suddenly looking very,... what's the word?... *Handsome,* Mr Magowan."

"Ha, thanks! You already said that."

"You may return the compliment if you wish, but don't strain yourself."

I cover my sincerity with irony. "I think you're very beautiful, Rebecca."

She sees through my cover and blushes. "Shut up." She leans back, sinking into the leather of the sofa and sighs a long, expansive sigh. "We must have walked miles. I'm absolutely knackered."

"It must have been couple of miles, yes."

"It's all right for you. You've got more legs than me."

"There's not that much wrong with your leg, Rebecca. You seem to make way very well on it."

Another sigh, shorter, sharper; thoughts boiling; impulse rising - a dangerous Rebecca. She looks sideways at me. "We could always,... you know,..."

"What?"

"You *know,..."* she rolls her eyes unhelpfully.

"Have dinner, here?" I offer, hopefully.

"Dinner?" She's puzzled - clearly this isn't what she was thinking but considers it a good idea anyway. "That would be great," she says, then returns to her earlier, ambiguous thread: "And then?...." she raises her eyebrows, suggestively, nodding at me as if to coax out the right answer - that she knows it's in there somewhere.

But I'm clueless. "And then?"

"Oh, for God's sake, Tim. Why don't we see if they if they have a *room*?"

"A room, *singular*?"

She nods again, emphatically. It seems I have hit upon the right answer at last. But is she serious? Or is this another game for me to

join in with? Is it banter and a quick witted return she wants? I know she said earlier how she possessed me now, but I have convinced myself she did not mean it in a romantic or a sexual way - more spiritual surely? This woman is, after all, an ordained priestess, and keeps insisting I am a shaman.

How the hell is that supposed to work?

"Em,..."

"Oh, please don't think about it." She pouts appealingly. "Just say *yes*. I'd like a nice big dinner." She holds her hands wide apart as if measuring a prize fish. "I mean *this* big, and one we don't have to prepare ourselves. Then I want a long soak in hotel-freebie bubble bath, and a cosy bed, snuggled up to a cosy, good looking man."

"I knew it. Spoiled little rich girl. My place isn't good enough for you now?"

"Of course it is. But don't you find hotels sexy?"

"I,... really haven't thought about it in a while. You're very kind, and I'm flattered, but I'd hardly call myself good looking, and you'd feel the same if you knew. Remember - you've not seen me without my clothes on, yet."

"And if you remember, actually, I have."

"That was a dream. You were making me up. There's no telling how you saw me then, but I can assure you the reality of my physique will be different; it may shock you, and not in a good way."

"No, you're forgetting again. I saw you this morning, by the tarn. My eyesight's not so bad as you think it is. Oh, don't be such a grumpy old man. Let's book a room. This place is so nice."

"I thought we were saving our cash - and anyway I don't have enough cash on me to cover this. And I'm assuming they won't be taking cards."

"I didn't notice anything in reception that said they weren't. And since it's my idea, I'll pay. It makes me feel less cheap, renting a room for sex, if I pay."

I can't believe we're discussing this, can't believe I'm not dreaming it, inventing it with my lurid imagination.

"But we can't leave the car in town overnight. This is the Lakes. It'll get clamped and I'll have to re-mortgage the house to get it released. Look, if you're tired, stay here for a bit. Have tea, a glass of wine. I'll walk back into town for the car."

"I'm not tired."

"But you said,..."

"Tim, Tim,.. you darling lump of a man. You've scored. I'm a virgin, admittedly somewhat over-ripe, but I want you to deflower me. Now. This minute. Or don't you want me?"

I'm looking down, head in hands, steadying myself, steadying my reality, for surely we've spun off into fantasy here, into dreams again? She reads it the wrong way. "I'll take that as a no," she says. She sounds a little stiff, and I'm afraid I've offended her.

"It's not that," I tell her. "Of course I want to. What man wouldn't want to, I mean with you,.."

The tension between us has had my head spinning for days now, and, as you know, my curiosity about Rebecca has already extended from the merely intellectual, into the realm of the physical. I do want to hold her, to be tender with her, and this sudden flowering of,... whatever it is on her part has me aching for it too. "It's just that you said,..."

"What?"

"That you wanted to remain,... em,... intact,...unless you knew we were all going to die. And you just heard the PM. Nothing bad is going to happen. We're all saved."

"And you believed that did you? I don't know, Tim. If you ask me the PM had the look of a man who didn't believe a single word he was saying. I think we can forget the Fresher's Ball in September. You were right, there won't be one. *We're all fucking doomed.*"

I want to shake the day clear now. We've just been told there's no danger, that it's business as normal, which has to be true because that's the way things have always been. Yet our mood, our intuition, and possibly even our dreams all have us thinking the opposite. It's irrational, unsettling, but you don't clear the day by shaking it - that way you just end up muddying things even more. And if you do the opposite, if you sit calmly and wait for the grit to settle out, reality can move on in unexpected ways without you.

I am with a woman, Lewis, rather a good looking woman, quirky, odd, sparkly, and she's inviting me to partake of her. And I'm squirming like a worm on a hook. What the hell's the matter with me?

"You're serious, about the room? I mean,... look,... I'm badly out of shape and practice in,... well,... in that sort of thing."

She nods. "We've all been hurt in love, Tim,... but speaking for

myself, I'm thinking the time has come to accept that I'm still worth it. And with you I feel I am,... worth it, that is - worth feeling good about myself again. And so are you. I don't care if it takes you all night." She gives me a saucy twinkle. "In fact I rather hope it does."

"But,..."

"Oh,... you and your flipping buts, Magowan!"

"But,...nothing. I admit defeat. And gladly. Let me walk back into town for the car. You see if you can book a room."

She's surprised, wide eyed of a sudden. Have I called her bluff? "You mean it? Really?"

"Yes."

"Okay,..." She thinks for a moment, reading all the permutations. "Oh, I think I know what you're doing here. You're hoping there'll be no vacancies, or the card machine won't be working. But if we can't book a room, and we end up going back to the cabin I want you to know my door is open tonight, and I'm pushing those twin beds together."

"Won't work."

"What?"

"Already tried it. My wife and I. The beds slide apart mid-coitus and you end up falling through. And anyway,..."

"What? You can't possibly have any more objections."

"We have no,... *things*."

"What? What things?"

"You know - *condoms*,..."

"Don't be an arse, you fire blanks remember?"

"I know. But you should be careful with strangers. I might have,... I don't know,... an SPD or something."

"You mean an *STD*? Don't be ridiculous. And you're not a stranger."

"But you should never,..."

"All right,... I'm ahead of you. I picked some up at the supermarket yesterday. They're in my bag, if you must know. But you'll have to show me how to put them on."

"It's all right, I can put it on."

"Damn you, *I* want to do it. I always though it might be part of the fun."

She flushes red, pulls back a triumphant smile, satisfied in the knowledge that she has me now, that I've worked myself onto the level of her own vibrations, and for all of my apparent reluctance,

I'm as excited at the sudden prospect of us making love as she is.

How long has it been Tim?

Oh, I don't know, Lewis.

And even then I don't think it worked out very well.

Of course any other man, blind in lust would not leave her now, would not spend a good hour walking back into town for the car. He'd say fuck the car; he'd say let it be clamped, let the council tow it away because it's so old it's barely worth the petrol in the tank. And I'm about to tell her this, but it's she who opens up that tease of space between us.

"Go get the damned car," she says. "I'll be waiting."

Chapter 31

I walk back to Ambleside along the main road, walk so fast I get splints in my shins and have to sit down half way while they ease. It's a beautiful late afternoon, the sky has peeled wide open now to a deep and flawless summer blue. Meadows are crisp and golden under the post meridian sun. Men in cricket whites practice under trees, the leaves a rich hue, held on arms outstretched with such a dreamy languor they appear as if painted in an improbable fantasy. All of it astonishes me. There's a tingle about the world suddenly, like I'm anticipating the first time with any woman - and it's been so long, it might as well be.

It surprises me these things are still important.

Why can life not be as vital as this all the time, Lewis? Surely it's just a question of allowing oneself to feel it this way!

The car is waiting.

I'd half expected it to have disappeared, like they do in dreams, or you've forgotten where you parked it so you go on an anxious quest to find it, and the dream shifts into disappointment before you wake. But no, there it is, and it starts. I let the fan-belt squeal a bit, let it reassure me of the reality of the moment, as I sit there, foot on the clutch, gear half snicked in. My vision is much sharper suddenly. I see the motes of dust, the dings and gouges in the bodywork. These things have always been there, but blurred out somehow by my imperfect perception.

Only now do I see them.

I realise this is how I want to experience Rebecca - my senses heightened, so I am aware of her every pore, her every breath, every downy hair, and the scent of her, as we make love.

I don't really believe we're going to be hit by an asteroid, do I? I'm cynical about the pronouncements of authority, as you know Lewis, but that's on account of my own perceived powerlessness to change the course of my life. So you must take no notice of my high-flown language, my philosophical pretentiousness. I haven't got it in me to be a serious threat to authority, a serious dissident in the definition of our collective reality. I'm just a whining bastard like all the rest, happy to take pot-shots at the suits, but loathe to step in and sort things out myself.

But now?

Now, I think I'm in love, or at least falling that way, and a man in love cares nothing for anything but the object of his desire. No, really, I don't care about you, Lewis. But to have fallen so late in love, is it possible Rebecca and I might have so little time left to experience one another? How can it be? Is even a man in love not to be granted his immortality any more?

An asteroid? A rock from space! What's the point of that?

It's the stuff of third rate apocalyptic science fiction.

How utterly banal!

Anyway,...

The car runs smoothly, no breakdown on the way. I keep my eye on the speed limit, for surely there must be a policeman waiting with a radar gun around the bend, ready to blow a hole in my day. I'm startled to see there is indeed a policeman, a gun lowered in my direction. It's a common enough precognition, but I'm not doing thirty. He lifts the gun as I pass, and I stare at him, wondering if he means anything. My expression puzzles him. Only policemen can blithely point gun-like things at other people. Anyone else is likely to be shot in the head by an armed response unit.

An hour has passed when I pull off the road onto the carpark of the hotel. I realise there's even a bag in the car, spare shirt and underwear, and shaving kit. I am more prepared than I know, and can even maintain my freshness for another day. The hotel is still there, not morphed or disappeared, dreamlike, and taken Rebecca with it. Everything is coming together as if fated!

You sound so childish, Timothy.

And excited by it.

I walk inside. Rebecca is still in the lounge, glass of sparkling wine on the table - though she has taken off her jacket and cardigan and sits now in a comfortably crumpled cream blouse, with a sturdy black bra showing through. The waitress is beside her. They are like old friends, watching TV together. I come closer, confused, rendered sluggish suddenly, wary of the shift, ready to wake now, but Rebecca has seen me, gathers me to her side and I sit with her.

"What is it?"

She shushes me, and points to the TV.

There's been a development, an announcement by the Russian and Chinese authorities. The calculations of the western scientists are based on an unreliable model, they say, and are therefore off by a significant degree. An asteroid will indeed strike the earth on the

17th. The impact will be somewhere in Western Europe - Northern England probably, though precise latitude and longitude are as yet uncertain.

Western authorities have issued counter statements condemning the Russian and Chinese statements as unfounded - indeed mischievous. Stock markets across Europe are in free fall. The banks are running. London, Frankfurt, Paris, Stockholm.

That's why our debit cards no longer work.

Anywhere.

By morning the airports will be in meltdown as people try to leave the possible impact zone.

The West accuses the East of a cynical attack on its economy. The East stands by the predictions of its astronomers. They have also reduced the size of the asteroid, so the impact will affect only western Europe. The East, and the United States will suffer dramatic fall out, and a Tsunami on the eastern seaboard that will engulf New York, but inland the infrastructure of civilisation will remain intact.

It is survivable, for them.

But for us?

Not.

The seventeenth, did they say? The seventh today. We have ten days.

I don't know, Lewis. I'm no nearer the truth of this. Are you? But as broadsides go it's a good one. I feel the ground shake. Are you still there, my friend? I press the send button on the 'Droid, to make sure you get my story so far - I mean, while I still have the chance, and you have the time to listen.

The waitress's name is Clare. She's about 25, looks pale now, and though she remains perfectly composed, folds willingly into Rebecca's embrace. I hear myself saying: "It's all right. This just means they're not sure - one lot saying one thing, the other lot another. They'll be announcing a joint conference next to thrash it all out. They'll talk and talk and talk, and eventually it'll go away like every other news story."

Claire nods, but from her frown I take it she does not appreciate my dry humour. She tugs open the top button of her blouse, reveals the soft white hollow of her throat - another dream premonition that summons the image, and the counsel, of Emma Louise Hollander. Then she pulls off her pinafore, announces she's going

home, wishes us well, and walks out. There are guests to wait on at dinner, rooms to clean, but minimum wage doesn't cut it any more - not when there might only be a few weeks left to live - unless you can get out of the country and all the way to the other side of the world. Or to America.

Rebecca leans back, focuses again on the TV, but they've returned to the PM, repeating his earlier statement. The news is regurgitated, no longer useful.

She gives a grim sort of smile, raises her brows quirkily. "At least the press might leave that poor teacher alone, now."

"Ah, yes. Poor bugger. Silver lining's eh? This one will run and run for weeks. You don't believe any of it do you?"

"That we're to be spared, or that we're doomed? One of those scenarios must be true. I think I'm tending towards us being spared. What kind of logic is that? When they tell us there's no danger I fear the worst. When they tell us the worst, I don't believe that either. All we know for certain is the banks have collapsed, and that's the most dangerous thing right now."

"More dangerous than the sky falling on top of us?"

"Oh, yes. Considerably worse. It means I can't pay for the room on my debit card."

Of course it's not certain the sky will fall, Lewis. Not yet. But Rebecca's right: if our cards don't work, we both know that means instant anarchy. Forget governments, it is the banks who control civilisation – control them with a flick of the switch that controls the ATMs and internet bank transfers. But people must eat, so there'll be policemen and then soldiers with guns outside the shops by midnight, stopping us from helping ourselves - whether others have thought about that or not yet - and I wager most of them haven't. So programmed are we to accept the run of things, we'll be offering our cards for payment for days and days, until the message finally sinks in.

That nothing works any more.

And we are only as solvent as the cash in our pockets.

I have about £300k in electronic ones and zeros in the bank, my retirement pot. £50 cash, in my pocket. You tell me, Lewis. What am I really worth now?

By weekend we'll have the first violent clashes - in the cities, probably, and then there'll be a curfew. There are only so many Taser-boys to go around. How many? A hundred thousand?

Bolstered by how many troops? Another hundred thousand. It sounds a lot, but we are seventy million, and suddenly we have nothing to lose.

"Well," says Rebecca. "One thing's for sure, and as crazy as it might sound, this is probably the safest place in the world right now. The Lakes will be empty in a couple of days - most of its population's just visiting anyway." She shivers, hugs herself - someone walking over her grave.

It's hard to see where any of this ends, now. Russia and China have opened the possibility of it being survivable, and that means they'll have the whole of Western Europe banging on their door, wanting to be let in.

America too.

The 'Droid bleeps. Text received.

"It's from Raul."

"What does he say?"

"WTF. Question mark. Question Mark."

I wonder if South Africa is far enough away. If he and Dora will be safe there. I gaze towards the exit, from where Clare has just slammed the door in final parting, and I wonder if there'll be any staff at all by this evening. What will the guests do with no one to serve them dinner?

"So, you didn't manage to book a room?"

"No. The card reader wouldn't work for my deposit. The manager suggested I tried later, after dinner, but I doubt things will have improved much by then - at least from what we've just heard. I'm sorry, Tim. I was so looking forward to it."

The power fails. The TV goes blank. All the lights over the reception desk wink out, and the alarm goes off for good measure, filling the air with a terrible, wailing din. It is the pinnacle of the forewarning of doom I had this afternoon. I feel it like a slap in the face, something to chasten and awaken.

No, I am not dreaming this.

The manager, a young man with a sweaty face and an eastern European accent blusters out from the office, and calls for everyone to make for the exit. He hasn't seen the news, thinks perhaps his hotel is really on fire.

With a heavy sigh, Rebecca grabs her things. "Oh,... *f,... uck it.*"

We follow the guests out onto the carpark. There's no panic. It's like your regular fire drill, no one really taking it seriously, and no

way of knowing if it's for real until the fire crew turns up.

"Let's go back to the cabin," I tell her. "I'll feel more comfortable riding this one out up there."

She nods.

My 'Droid is down to just a few percent charge, so I drop it into the dock as we drive away. I note there's no longer any mobile coverage. Have the masts gone too? So soon? Did you get my stuff, Lewis? I'd hate to think no one was listening to me now.

We have power at the cabin - better get up there as quickly as possible; there's no way of knowing how people will react, nor what we'll find on the roads by tomorrow.

"We're going to be okay," I tell her, but she's not in the mood for false optimism.

"We're going to be dead," she says.

"No we aren't, but even if we are, we both know we'll still be okay."

Chapter 32

They say a tree knows when it's reached its last season, that come blossom time it puts on the finest display of its centuries old life, one last spectacular flourish before it capitulates, turns brittle and rots. Likewise, this evening is exquisite. There is a slow, rich deepening of contrasts, and a drift to amber as the sun lowers to the black rim of the fells. It feels as if the earth has been hoarding its jewels, and only now, at the first tangible hint of our extinction, is it showing us how beautiful it can be. Except of course it's not that at all. The earth has always been beautiful; it's only now we notice, only now we appreciate what we've had all along.

I wonder if I should weep for the earth, but of course the earth will be all right. One small hole will make no difference. Geological time will smooth it over. There will be a renewal, and future sunsets as beautiful as this, just no human eyes to bear witness to them. I'm wondering about this as we drive up the hairpins on the mountain, the tyres squealing and spitting flint. It reminds me of that Zen Koan about a tree in the forest that falls alone and makes no sound - because there's no one around to hear it.

In weeping for the earth we're only weeping for ourselves, not so much for the end of beauty, as for the end of knowing, and seeing, and being. I hope there are sentient beings on other worlds, scattered richly throughout the universe, then God might continue the voyage of self-discovery through reflection in the world of forms. It's suddenly the only thing that makes sense, or God would be scurrying about right now, intervening to spare us all. But God has never intervened to spare the suffering and the dying of the earth, so I can't imagine why he would start now?

He?

I know, Lewis.

Old habits and all that.

Of course God transcends gender. And like many in the secularised west now, I have trouble with the word "God" anyway. We blur it out, call it *meaning*, call it *the ground of being*, call it *oneness*, *the All*,... but what we still mean is *God*.

What was I saying, that evening at Raul's? I don't know, we said so much - but something about how we've been spun a delusion, and we believe in it totally, unaware that actually all we are is

slaves. *I don't know what will happen. I'd like to imagine a mass awakening, a flowering of consciousness and mindfulness that transforms us overnight into spiritually enlightened beings. It's our only hope. But short of a massive natural disaster that shocks us all to the core, I don't see it happening any time soon, do you?*

Well this is it, Lewis. We have a few weeks left. Do we find peace, or do we merely fight over the last of the bread?

Rosy awaits us by the tarn - pea green paint and pretty little Gingham curtains - old, familiar, homely. I'm wondering how far we'd get in her. On good roads, we might make as much as five hundred miles a day? But even if we got a boat across the Channel, what would the roads be like, going east? Maybe we'd be lucky to make twenty a day. Faster walking. And east into what? A slower death? The silk road is no longer a trail that welcomes westerners - it is beset by trolls who cut off heads and parade them on You Tube. We'd probably struggle even to get to Middleton, for someone has only to sneeze these days and the roads are grid-locked.

I hope Raul has the sense to get on a plane and scuttle further east.

Rebecca sees me eyeing Rosy. "I mean it, you know. You can have her in exchange for the keys to the cabin."

"And leave you up here on your own? I don't think so. You don't know how to work the stove. It can be a bit temperamental."

"You'd better stick around then. Nothing worse than being cold, is there? I wish I'd bought more food yesterday. The supermarket will be impossible now." She thinks for a moment, descends into the realm of endlessly dark possibility. I see it reflected in her eyes. Then she brightens as she forces herself back to the surface. "What will happen do you think?"

She knows well enough what will happen: central control will fall apart. Everywhere. There will be no more head offices to pass the buck to, so it'll be up to local managers to make decisions - supermarkets, banks, petrol stations. Do they stay and manage their limited resources, or do they hit the roads and run, like everyone else? And are there managers any more? I mean *real* managers; real leaders! Would I trust Strickland to be a leader in a situation like this? No. Strickland will be on the first flight out to as far away as he can get.

Come on, Tim.

What are you thinking?

I'm thinking many things, but most of all I'm thinking we're best not to rely on others for very much now. And I'm thinking of supplies: there are carrots and potatoes in the ground, a cupboard full of tins: meats, soups, beans. Enough to last a couple of weeks at least. I recall there's also a gun in the attic space - don't get excited, Lewis – it's just an old air-rifle, and a box of lead pellets - relic of my boyhood - enough to drop a pigeon or a rabbit if we need to supplement our diet.

We'll not starve between now and when it hits. Supermarkets be damned, even I can survive ten days on what we've got up here, and after that it won't matter.

If it hits.

What?

If it hits, Timothy. Remember your own government is saying it won't.

Would you sooner trust the word of ugh,... foreigners?

I don't know. But this isn't at all what I expected it to be like.

I mean,... the end of the world.

Remember all those disaster movies that play upon our worst fears? My, how they make us scream and run. You might think it true, that this would be the inevitable fate of humankind now, but this afternoon I've discovered something counter-intuitive in us. I can only speak for Rebecca and myself, of course, but when faced with the likelihood of our own imminent end, we disregard it. We are not looking at our own impending deaths here. We are still looking at the rest of our lives, however short they might be measured now. And if we must die, then better in a state of grace, than in a state of panic. But this is only because we feel we have nowhere we can usefully run to.

I realise Rebecca is staring at me, her hand resting upon my sleeve - always a gentle contact now, a growing closeness.

"You scared?" she asks.

My brain is working in slow motion, but working more clearly than I'm used to. Having such a short time limit imposed upon your life paradoxically grants you all the time in the world, because suddenly only certain things matter - the rest you discard, allowing you to expand your life into the space the garbage leaves behind.

Am I scared?

"I don't know, Rebecca." Is it what they call denial? I'm still holding onto the possibility our own politicians are being more

truthful, but then there's also the possibility they're simply as clueless as everybody else and are merely saying what they feel is right for us to hear. "I'm glad I'm with you, that's all I know. Fear may come later."

She's nodding. "I'm glad to be with you, too."

She has a good heart, this woman; she's kind and compassionate, the perfect priestess, my own private woman of God. Who could ask for a more perfect companion to see in the end of the world?

"Practicalities," she says.

"Hmm?"

She counts the priorities on her fingers: "Food, water, information, sex."

"Em,... Water: unlimited. This is the wettest place in England after all. Food: already calculated that, plenty to last the ten days. Power: also plenty, and un-interruptible - electricity from the beck and the solar panels, also plenty of wood for the burner and the stove. Information? Car radio I suppose."

"I have one of those wind up radios in the van. Might save your car battery if we should need it."

"Okay. Perfect. We're sorted then. We have everything we need"

"You forgot the sex. How are we fixed for that?"

"Depends."

"On?"

"How hungry we are for it."

She turns away, looks wistfully out of the window, at the sunlight reflected in the tarn. "Can it be fun?," she asks. "I'd like it to be fun, Tim. It doesn't have to be serious does it?... I mean all grunty, and huffy-puffy? I want it to be like this morning, you know,... swimming together." She turns back to me, eyes alight with the memory: "Silly, flirty, crazy, sparkly, bright."

"Yes, I'd like that too."

"And you don't,... need to worry about hurting me." She blushes. "My fingers were always a little over-eager, when I was a girl - you know? Forever poking them into little holes."

"Okay. Yes,..." I realise I'd not thought of that. "Righto. So,..."

"Say something. I need to know you want it to be this way as much as I do."

"Sex?"

"*Everything,* you dummy."

"I do. I do want it"

"Is that all? Is that all you have to say?"

"Yes,... no,... I mean,..."

We've just been told the world's about to end. Maybe. And that should make a difference to how I feel, I mean about everything, shouldn't it? And really I should be able to say much more about how I'm feeling, because, you know, I'm feeling a lot. These past days, living with Rebecca, and dreaming with her, have been the most perfect, the most stimulating I can remember in my whole life, and if this is all I have left, I'm grateful for it. To have the days numbered now should be a terrible, fearful thing, but it's not, and I don't think it ever will be. And it won't, because I'm with her.

Can I not tell her that?

She presses my hand, shutting off my confession. "It's all right," she says.

I don't know how old you are, Lewis. I'm imagining you're much younger than me - if only because most people still in work usually are. So it may come as a surprise when I tell you I don't know what to do. I mean, I've been here before of course: a man, a woman, and the cosy interior of a car. And a feeling. It's in the eyes, and in the smile, and something else - an electricity perhaps. What to do? We are so much older, she and I, and to kiss seems childish. I catch her hand and caress it. I feel the shape of it - the line of her fingers, the hard mountaintops of her knuckles. And I convey what? Compassion? Longing? Lust?

"And you'll make love to me?" she asks. "Really?"

"Only if I you let me pretend you're Gilda."

"Oh,.. but you're such a *cad*, Johnny."

She reads me correctly. Decides to take it slow. "Come on then," she says. "Let's scrape something together for dinner."

Chapter 33

I'm banking a lot on a dream - I know that - banking a lot, too, on the counsel of a dream-sprite who's been slow introducing herself all these years, and only now with the world about to end, allegedly, she decides to make so bold. I'm also aware I'm probably conflating the dream with intimations from reality, I mean in making Penrith ground zero. It just makes sense for now, and is better that way, because I'm thinking an asteroid fifty miles across will see me and Rebecca out in an instant - that we won't even see it coming.

And what then?

You might have grasped by now, Lewis, I'm reckoning on the possibility that the dream reality, as revealed in the lucid state is not merely a function of biology. Indeed, I have no choice but to fall back - if only for my continuing sanity - on the old hermetic notion of a psychical, rather than a physical underpinning to the universe - that it is an ocean of consciousness, and one we will all be returning to shortly. You might find this strange, being, as you are, quite literally plugged into the organs of a machine that is by its very nature not possessed of the subtleties of sentience. You will therefore make no sense of my view of the world, while the world makes no sense to me without it. That is the essential difference between us, Lewis, the essential disconnect, the true nature of my sedition, my religion, and your delusion.

You think me a fool perhaps? No matter; I take comfort from the fact that, in the world of the machine, it is better to be considered a fool, than to be truly feared.

Of what am I aware, Lewis?

I suppose, dimly, I am aware of you, and no less obscurely, aware of myself as the memory of my life's journey thus far. But more than this I am aware of the awareness of my self, and how it grows within me, this thing that of all things is alone capable of viewing my life from a detached perspective. I wonder how it will maintain the awareness of my annihilation. I wonder if such a thing is even possible? It seems almost a philosophical paradox - something that might adequately prove a rule, if I only had the wit to elucidate any further, and defend myself from all counter-arguments.

But that I merely cannot conceive of it does not make untrue.

I know I'm not that old but, trust me, Lewis, you start to think about death as you age. You think about it when those who have brought you into the world begin to move on and, if you're lucky, you learn through their passing there is nothing to fear in death itself, only that you might yourself be blessed with a painless exit.

All right. What if it's not Penrith? What if it's not right on top of my head? What if it's Iceland, or somewhere in the Barents' sea, or Norway? All of them might be labelled loosely "Western Europe". Might we feel pain then? Might we feel the searing shock of flame that incinerates us? Might we have ample time to see it coming from beyond the rim of the fells, before even these mighty fells themselves are consumed by the cataclysm?

It seems I'm banking much upon our fragility.

Perhaps an overdose of pills would be a better way out, except none of this might happen, and then what a waste that would be, not to see Rebecca dance at the Fresher's Ball in September, or better still, grow old with her, watch her hair turn grey and her teeth fall out.

Ah,... such is the sweet dilemma of being!

They who shall not grow old, nor age weary them, nor the years condemn.

And at the going down of the sun,...

But who will remember them?

And who, Lewis, will remember *us*?

Chilly thought – that we shall not be remembered.

I'm thinking about this as we work our way through the rampant strawberry patch. We're gathering the remaining fat fruit into a bowl that Rebecca holds to her bosom, though I note she munches meditatively on more fruit than she harvests. There is a profound sense of the depth of our isolation here - not a single unnatural sound, and the air is supernaturally still, as if the world is holding its breath in shocked surprise.

We have said we'd better listen to the BBC, on the hour, but this seems now more an outmoded kind of duty to current affairs, and in the end we forget, put it off until the next hour, and then the next, and by then the sun is going behind the fells, bursting through the western windows of the cabin, lighting up the world in what seems its last gasp of golden glory.

Rebecca brings her radio from the van, but does not wind it up. I

don't understand our detachment. There may be something of importance, a gem of knowledge that will save our lives - but more likely not. Besides, I'm thinking we have ten days of sunsets yet to go, so tomorrow is plenty soon enough to be picking up on the news. Or is it simply that we have more pressing things on our minds. Such is the power of sex, it will transcend even thoughts of death.

On last good shag, eh, Lewis?

Better than fighting over the last of the bread, anyway.

I don't know how best to do this, or even if she still wants it. Should I light candles? Should I lay a trail of rose petals? I wait until we're drying pots in the kitchen, the pair of us still quiet, still contemplative as the sun goes down and the light leaks from the sky. It feels portentous, this silence between us, for up 'til now our togetherness has been characterised by endless talk, and most of it rubbish, except for its mutually gravitational effect.

I thread the towel through the ring, wonder if it's worth washing it now, or if I should just let it dry, and does it matter anyway? Curious, the run of our thoughts, now we suspect there's so little time left.

Ten days, Lewis!

I step out onto the rear deck, leave the door ajar, then she might follow. It's warm still, the heat of the sun trapped in the sink of the amber stained planks. It's all but dark now. She comes and we gaze out over the dim silhouette of the forest - black zig-zags rising to the velvet night, the brighter stars bleeding through. The timbers click, as they cool.

"We don't have to do this," she says. "I mean,... not if you don't,..."

As she's speaking, I turn and lay my hand gently upon her sex. She backs up in surprise at such directness, flattens her palms against the timbers, looks at me, eyes wide, lips parted.

I close my eyes now, or I shall not have the courage to go on. It feels so hot, her sex, through her thin skirt. She catches her breath. It's permission I think I'm seeking here, trying to judge by her reaction how next to act. I don't even think I'm aroused at this point - more speculative - but then she curls her arms around my neck, and breathes her assent into my ear.

"Yes, Tim. Yes."

I find the clasp of her skirt nestled above the swell of her

derrière and I open it, peel the zipper down. The skirt obliges, falling smoothly to the deck, and now I feel my hands upon her thighs under the hem of her blouse, tracing out the waistband of her pants. Suddenly there is a momentum, and I find my fingers gathering under her waistband, then sliding down into the heat, through the softness and the silky tingle of her hair to seek the moistness, and there to linger.

She leans into me, stretches upwards that I might more easily reach into her, and she melts, oozing warm honey through my fingers.

I feel a shaking, a trembling.

What's this?

She's laughing. Excited, I think. I hope. "Don't open your eyes," she whispers.

"Why not?"

"My pants are tragic. I would have worn better if I'd known today was going to be the day I let a man put his hand inside of them."

I hook my thumbs under the waistband, and move to slide them down. She catches her breath again - a wonderful sound, that I can make her feel this way - as if cold water were lapping around her chest, making her gasp at the challenge of it.

I kneel, take the pants down slowly and she steps from them, slipping off her odd flip-flops as she goes, steadies herself now with her hands upon my shoulders, not speaking. Eyes closed still, I am drawn by the scent of her. She leans back against the glass, legs tense with anticipation, a little apart. I look then, look up at her, up beyond the peeling open of her folds, and into her eyes. They're burning, and there's something deeply meditative in her breaths.

Not fear.

She's readying herself, spreads herself with her hands, thumbs crossed, fingers wide, like a bird's wings. I see the want, read the permission, and the absolute surrender.

Chapter 34

I am sitting alone in the plush, sex-red seats of a theatre. It puts me in mind of the picture house at Ambleside, but is much, much bigger and it echoes to the sound of feet upon the stage.

Tap dancing.

A man is calling time. Feet beat out a manic rhythm, a thing that seems impossible it could ever be created by the human frame.

I give you Fred Astaire and Rita Hayworth.

To my knowledge they did not perform at the London Palladium, but I'm thinking, with that peculiar sense of knowing in dreams, that's where we are now, or at least this is my interpretation of it, informed in part by my visit to the picture house with Rebecca.

Astaire sparkles, his deft athleticism disguised by an air of ease, and humour. Hayworth sparkles too, and with a characteristic grace, shoulders back, loose, shimmying playfully. Sexy. Teasing. Except it's not Hayworth, but Rayworth.

Rebecca!

She looks down at me from the eternal sunshine of the stage, and even in the midst of her energetic tapping and shimmying, she casts me a wink. This is her element, and I thrill to see her. Rayworth and Astaire fly - the energy of their legs and the rattling of their feet is entirely at odds with the poise of their bodies. And the effort, the pounding of the blood in their veins and the sweat shining on their brows, is hidden in their stage smiles.

Astaire challenges her, stomping, hanging the rhythm mid beat. She responds with a hoot and matches step for step, then strikes up a rhythm of her own. Ra-ta-tat-tat-ta. Ra-ta-tat-ta-ta. Ra-ta-tat-ta-ta. Then they partner up and cartwheel round the stage, feet a blur, a staccato rhythm upon the boards, like an invisible orchestra.

They are their own accompaniment.

He calls her Becky, she calls him Fred.

Yes, yes, Lewis. I *am* dreaming all of this, *obviously*, and though I am enjoying the spectacle, it's also a little exasperating, because the last thing I remember of my waking life is my face resting in the soft pubic curls of Rebecca's delightfully aromatic mons - a thing astonishing in itself, but I have no memory how we went from there. I'm thinking I must have missed a great deal from my

accounting of things thus far - and I'm anxious to catch up.

Why are dreams like this? I mean, why so selective in what they allow you to remember of waking, while dreaming, and what you remember of dreaming while awake?

As I look around this vast theatre, I realise I am not alone. There's a shadow in the box, up to my right. Emma, I think. And way over to my left, sits a man, insubstantial, dark. I have the impression of a tuxedo and silk scarf, also a silver topped cane, like a dandy or an impresario. Lewis? Is that you, my friend? Do you invade my dreams too now?

No, wait,... it's Rebecca's nemesis, I think - a smart dressed fellow, yes, but a low sort, as Emma put it, the sort who would ruin a woman, because she would not consent to him.

Except he did not ruin her, did he?

Whatever the trials of her life - and she's had plenty so far - her experience of life, and her spirit has rendered her now as perfect a being as any I can imagine. There's such joy in her, and a wisdom too. The dancer, the priestess and the teacher.

Is that love talking? I suppose it is.

Don't question this, Timothy, just enjoy it.

Ra-ta-tat-ta-ta. Ra-ta-tat-ta-ta.

Rebecca does not see her nemesis, so absorbed is she in her dance. Aware of his materialisation, I keep him in the corner of my eye, observing with curiosity how he grows less substantial as my impression of Rebecca's joy mounts. He cannot threaten her here. I am within striking distance, and my kung-fu is stronger than his - *there are many kinds of kung-fu, Lewis.*

Besides, there is also Emma.

My, how Rebecca dances!

Does it make a difference that this is a dream, and not reality? I think not. Much of our angst in waking life is dissolved in the dreaming - or we would all go mad. In the dreaming, the pieces of soul we have left trapped in time are able to catch up, able to rise from the depths.

Emma appears now, closer at hand. She has descended from her regal perch and is moving slowly along the theatre aisle. She casts me a glance in passing, but drifts over to him, sits down beside him, puts an arm around him, whispers something as his head bends towards her.

I am not to know him, she's saying, not to challenge him to a

duel for Becky's honour.

Becky?

Yes, it sounds so much lighter than Rebecca, doesn't it?

Is this the fragment of her soul we have come to find? I think it must be.

What's Emma doing now? The man is weeping. Can it be true? She holds him. I feel his sorrow, his shame. I weep for him too, feel compassion,... he fades to smoke. The sense of threat, of menace is gone. Rebecca has released a part of herself that was trapped here, in this time. With him. I dare say I'll never know who he was; she will never tell me, and I shall never ask.

Are you disappointed Lewis, at so soft and subtle a dissolving? Would you have preferred guns and fast cars and women with big boobies? And a terrible revenge involving the letting of blood, the severing of fingers, and head, and big explosions?

No, my friend. We do things differently here.

But I should feel more of a relief that he has gone - devil that he was - stalking on the periphery of my vision. Could it be he was only the harbinger of something else, something more to come? Something much, much bigger?

Yes.

There *is* something, I can feel it, darkening my spirits, but for now my consciousness has robbed me of it. Is something bad going to happen, Lewis? I mean in our ordinary waking reality?

Text me, dammit!

I need to know. Why can't I remember?

Emma is with me now, a comforting presence settling in the seat beside me, her shoulder pressing into mine. Her scent is sweet. We are one, she's telling me. We are together in this.

"It's all right," she says. "She can't see me."

She's talking about Rebecca.

Does it trouble you, the way Emma is morphing, shape-shifting, so that now she and I might even be expressions of the same consciousness? Was I Emma in a past life? Is she me, now? Does it confuse you? Well, I don't understand it either, but the dream renders me comfortable with it.

What really troubles me is that in a deeper sense, you and I are the same too, Lewis. I can only suggest it's best neither of us thinks on that little gem for too long - considering what you're about, you risk vanishing into your own singularity, your own infinite regress.

Your own arsehole.

"So," she says. "It's all going rather well."

"Yes, though I can claim no responsibility. She's dancing, but I've no idea how we got here. And she certainly seems to need no help from me in that department."

"Just as well, darling, since you can hardly put one foot in front of the other."

"Ha! That's true. But she said she'd teach me a little, and I'm looking forward to it. Not that there's much point of course, what with the world about to end and everything. But still,... you never know."

The world about to end!

That's it!

That's what I couldn't remember. How could I have forgotten? Has it happened already? Can I not get back from this place? It would seem a fitting end, a sort of triumph, but no,... I seem to remember Rebecca and I are making love.

My God! How did *that* happen?

Emma sighs wistfully. "You seem happy, darling. And that's the main thing."

There's a pause in the dance and Astaire bows formally to Rebecca, kisses her hand. She curtseys with a giggle and he skips away into the wings. Then a band strikes up and the stage is lit in rainbow colours, a backing troupe can-cans from stage right, and curtains lift to reveal an Art Deco set, like something from a forties musical. Rebecca throws up her arms and begins to kick in tune. The theatre is full to the gunwales now with an excited crowd, pressing on all sides of me, obscuring my view. There's a terrific heat and a buzz.

Emma lays a hand upon my arm - something possessive in it. "Come, there's a better view from my box."

So I'm walking with Emma, casting a backward glance at the stage, not wanting to miss a moment, and she's complimenting me on being so relaxed in the dreaming now that I feel no need for the protection of my girls.

"I just forgot, that's all," I explain. "I got so caught up watching the dance."

"Yes, she *is* quite a dancer. Anyway, not to worry about your girls. I brought my own. They'll suffice for now."

"Can't wait to meet them. Look, Emma,..."

"Hmm?"

"I'm sorry, we broke your rules."

"And what were they, darling?"

"Rebecca and I - we realise we've been dreaming together, and we talked about it afterwards - established some veridical details, compared notes."

"Yes."

"You said not to."

"Oh,... Timothy, there are no rules. In the dreaming anything can be true. We must establish some limits, that's all, if we are to make way, make sense of things. So you broke the rules? So what? I wrote that journal mainly for myself. How others develop in the dreaming is entirely a matter for them. Would you have me punish you for it?"

She opens a door and I follow her through, but we don't step out into a theatre box. It's a small, enclosed space, like an elevator - steel lined, mirrored in places. There are tall warrior-women, Amazons, scantily clad, all leather straps and cami-knicks, like something out of a BDSM porn-fest.

"Em,.. These are your *Dakini's*?"

"That's right darling. I can see you're,... impressed."

As a sexual fantasy it would be corny, but that's not what this is about. The women are suddenly all around me. They take my arms, hold me rigid. One of them tears open my shirt and then Emma is turning to me with a long blade, and a squeamish look about her.

"I'm so sorry, Timothy. It's usually best to get these things over with quickly."

This is not my punishment, you understand? This is the dreaming at its most symbolic. A part of me shall die, tonight, but it is a part I no longer need.

You may not recognise me in the morning, Lewis.

I've never felt pain before in a dream. But a knife in the heart feels like - I don't know - how I imagine a heart attack will feel. She has to grit her teeth in order to work up the energy, to thrust it deep enough. And all I can do is look at her in dismay.

"I'm sparing you the gruesome bit," she says.

She's talking about my dismemberment. And the bit where they put me back together, at least in a metaphorical sense. None of this is literal, Lewis. Come on man, don't be so dense! You know what's happening here. And I am not being punished for breaking the

rules. This is more my reward for going beyond them, as much as we can speak of rewards here anyway.

Think of it more as an unlocking of something.

The pain fades into numbness and my vision begins to white out. I fear I'm about to wake. "Don't let me go, Emma. Not yet."

Emma smiles, her pearl white teeth one of the last things I remember clearly. She has something in her hands. A light, a jewel, something lit from within. The warrior women lower me to my knees. Emma lowers herself to me, and pushes the light into my head.

From an atmosphere of menace, the warrior women soften, become tender. I have an impression of laying back against an ample bosom, cool hands upon my brow, others over my heart, perhaps to heal the wound. Other hands are laid upon my arms and legs, infusing them with a warm energy. And then there's this thing in my head. It feels like a marble at first - about that size I mean - but then it swells to the size of a tennis ball, or a fist and I can feel it pushing against my skull, like it's going to burst through. The women comfort me as this goes on, and I contort against their restraint with the pain of it. I can feel them still, though I'm afraid the thing in my head has severed the optic nerves and left me blind - just a white field of vision; blank; no impressions; nothing; and a roaring in my ears like a waterfall.

"Emma?"

"Here, darling."

A hand is placed atop my head. Emma's I think - a touch familiar as my own. The numbness is creeping, dulling even the impressions of my bursting head, so eventually I lay helpless in something akin to a drunken stupor. Then I'm weeping.

"This is how it's done," she's saying. "You know this. You've been coming to it all your life, and feared it. So, bravely borne, my love. You'll be all right now. Let it all out. All the old hurt. Then we can piece you back together. Put you back in proper order this time. This time you can be whatever you want to be."

"But I don't know what I want to be."

"Yes you do. You're just afraid of becoming it."

The next lucid impressions I have are of the feel of a woman's body. Her thighs, her waist, her breasts. The body is moving, twisting, turning. I wonder if I'm waking mid-coitus, and I hold back anticipating the rush of memory that led up to this moment.

But that's not it. This is Rebecca I'm feeling. I know it is, but she's dancing, and I'm feeling what she's feeling. In this moment there is no separation, and her excitement is my excitement. The feel of her body is how *she* feels it.

I will myself a little clarity, and resolve my form at last into a theatre box, alone, looking down upon the closing number of that Hollywood musical - lead dancer: Rebecca Rayworth, silk dress, red lips and a sunshine smile - her partner in top-hat and tails. I take a moment to stare at my hands - a steadying gesture taught by other shamans.

The dream sharpens, my focus is narrowed.

The journey continues.

I *am* a shaman.

Of sorts.

But you can call me what you like, Lewis. I really don't care.

It's hard to convey the exact feel of this to you, and I'll struggle not to sound like someone away on a mind-blowing trip, but I would argue my coherence speaks for itself. All of this is real, even during the moments that are a disembodied whiteness, I retain a sense of my self, of all that I have done, and all that I have seen, and all that I have been. These are the pathways of the underworld, the inner world, the world of the psyche. Yes, I'm afraid they do exist, and you would be as well to prepare yourself for them, or you'll feel foolish when you eventually fetch up here, and try to make an accounting of your deeds.

Were you a good man, Lewis?

Well, let's just say for now, you were a good listener.

And Rebecca?

The show closes. The curtain falls and the theatre below erupts into excited applause. Rebecca appears and takes a bow, leaving, then returning to bow some more. She's carried upon the applause, her face alight as I have never seen it. She is lifted by the energy like a bird upon the wind. Then I picture her at school, the dowdy suit, the cane, the heavy limp as she makes her way to class and I begin to get a feel for what she lost. And for what she has regained.

Dignity, Lewis!

She leaves for the last time, the audience senses the finality, accepts it with grace. A one time only performance. The lights come up, and the theatre empties.

She was magnificent.

Since I don't wake up, I decide to find her. I wonder if this will be another of those dreams where I struggle to find things, and I'm thinking that would be a little tiresome, I mean with the world about to end shortly, topside, and still no memory of our making love, and I would like to remember it, to carry that memory into oblivion with me if I can.

I find her without any trouble. She's alone, behind the curtain, sitting cross legged upon the smooth stage, her grease painted brow dribbling with sweat.

The curtain rises then on the empty cavern of the Palladium, stacks on stacks of plush red seats. She has her chin in her hands, and wears an expression of dreamy delight. Then she sees me and leaps up, runs with arms wide to wrap them round in a triumphant embrace.

"Oh, Tim. I thought I'd lost you. I thought you'd woken up or something."

"No,... no. I saw you. Dancing. You were incredible."

"You think so? I felt a bit stiff at times - so out of practice. But,..." she sighs, unable to take it all in. "It was *magical*." She looks more closely at me and her joy shifts to concern. "Are you all right?" Her hands are on my face now, her fingertips wiping at my cheeks. "Have you been crying?"

"Possibly,...but only from watching you, Rebecca,.. that's all. I had no idea! Seeing you move like that! It was exhilarating."

"I've got her back now," she says. "I mean that part of me I thought I'd lost. Oh,... I know I can't take this with me,... I know I can't really dance like that any more,... not in the real world. But she's with me, in my heart. *I just know it*!"

"All we need now is to find the vicar in you, and then we're whole again."

We look at each other, then down at our toes like shy teenagers. "So," I say. "Isn't there a party or anything? You can't close a show like that without a backstage party."

"I,... I know. But,... I was never one for that sort of thing. And I was never lead dancer or anything like that – just one of the line-up. Easily overlooked. Easy to slip away unnoticed. No. I'm done now. It's enough. And, besides,... Tim, I can remember something, like an erotic dream - except I know *this* is the dream, so the erotic bit must have been somewhere else, in reality, do you think? And I want to get back to it, because I can't remember as much of it as I

want to."

"Me neither."

"And it,.. is with you, isn't it? The erotic stuff, I mean."

"I hope so."

"What should we do? How can we get back to that?"

"Well, this is London, I think, and we're dreaming. So, let's hail a taxi, book ourselves into the best hotel we can find, and just carry on wherever we think we might have left off."

"In the dream?"

"Why not? And here we needn't be encumbered by what's physically possible."

She blushes. "All right. Let's try that door over there."

We come out onto a wet street. It's cold, shivery, November time, I think. There's a traffic hiss and a dull roar that permeates our bones. It's some time from my memory, 1986 possibly, and a rare trip to London, to the theatre district. I usually struggle to hail a cab in this place - I'm just not assertive enough - but all I have to do here is think of one, and there it is, steaming through the traffic to the kerb beside us. Then we're in the back and holding onto each other, joined at the hip as the lights of the West End go flashing by.

I ask for the Dorchester.

"The Dorchester, Tim?"

"Why not? They have rooms there that cost ten grand a night, and tonight we won't be paying. This one's on the master projectionist."

"Who?"

"Of our dream."

"I hope you're as generous to your lady-friends in real life as you are in the dreaming."

"Of course I am."

She snuggles close, her excitement, as ever, infectious, and I have the giddy feeling that I must be dreaming, followed quickly by the reminder that I am.

"Tim, this really looks like London."

"Well, not *really*. But it seems remarkably coherent all the same."

"Can you change anything? Turn the driver into a rabbit. Go on!"

"What? Better not, eh? Sometimes it's like this - you find yourself in a place that's dreamed about a lot. It fixes things. Like in waking reality, it's better not to waste energy trying to interfere with it. It's a consensus thing."

"But,... where is it?"

"It's nowhere. Literally nowhere."

"It has to be *somewhere*."

"No. Trust me. It makes more sense that way. Geography is an obsolete concept here. The only way anything can exist at all is because there's nothing to exist in the first place. The universe is infinite, but it expands into nothing. There is *nothing*. That's why it's so big."

"Then we're nothing?"

"No. Without the right perspective, our lives can sometimes give us that impression. But really we're everything. And nothing at the same time."

She frowns. "You're making less sense than you used to. But I seem to know what you mean, which is worrying."

"Ha! You see how obvious it all is when you're dreaming? Only when we wake up does it become complicated and mysterious again."

"Oh, shut up. Say something banal for a change. Tell me my dress is nice."

"I can't, you're wearing jeans and a jumper."

"I am? Yes, I am. This is crazy. Has the asteroid hit, do you think? Are we dead yet?"

"We'd better not be. I've yet to enjoy the sensation of you putting a condom on me."

"Even here, you think of sex?"

"Why not? The best sex I ever had in my life was in a dream. Well,... actually the only kind of sex these days. Okay, we've arrived."

She looks up at the Dorchester, imagines a room the size of a house and a bed the size of a swimming pool. "Does it count here? Sex. I mean,... we're not exactly flesh, are we?"

"For ten grand a night, I expect it to count."

"Be serious."

"Feel my hand. Is that not flesh?"

But she's right. Does it *count*? And what does it mean anyway, to *count*?As we step out into the night, I wonder at the point of this. Although London feels as inflexible in the dreaming as it does in real life, I could still change this dream - change it into anything or anywhere I wanted. We could turn a corner, and we've only to wish it for us to be walking back to the cabin, turn another and be

stepping out onto the beach at St Tropez. I tip the driver a twenty and he slips off into the night without batting an eye. I wonder if he is a thought form, or if it's what he does in his dreams.

Drives a cab.

What do you do in the dream of London, Lewis?

I know there are many who are thrust into this environment long before they're ready. But there must be something different about that experience, because I cannot imagine this gnawing dissatisfaction I'm feeling now is what I should be feeling at all.

Feeling?

What is it Tim?

I have a fleeting and somewhat incongruous image of an inflated penis resting against a woman's mons, waiting for her to relax. It's dark, her hands are on my chest, as if to hold me back a little, to check my enthusiasm, while she wills herself to open and take me in. Her lips are drawn tight over her teeth, like she's about to have a blunt hypodermic shoved into her buttocks.

Rebecca?

No,.. nice try, Lewis, but it's actually Miranda, my wife. I am twenty five, and she's eighteen. Beautiful, sparkling. Where did it all go wrong? What was the point of that?

"Tim?"

Rebecca is tugging my arm, tugging me back to the cold and the wet of a London evening in the dreaming. "I'm sorry," I tell her. "I think I'm waking up."

She looks worried. "What? No, you can't leave me here on my own."

"It's all right. I'll wake you gently from the other side."

"And miss my nice hotel-room?" She's looking at me closely, reading something. "You look much younger here."

"So do you. About,... eighteen?"

"I do?" She covers her face. "Oh,... God, Tim. Go. Wake me up."

"Are you all right."

"No! I can't get used to this. I can't wake up after tonight - I mean after a dream like this - wake up with my make-up all over the pillow and my peg leg,... and hopping over to the bathroom because I can't find my,... f,... fucking stick. And I don't want you seeing me as I was at eighteen, and then waking up with my middle aged morning breath in your face, and my fat arse,.. and,...."

"It's all right. It's me. I'm imagining you at eighteen because I

just had a flash of my ex wife at the same age."

"Oh. That's nice. We're away somewhere making love and you're thinking of another woman?"

"Or I'm making love to her, and away thinking of you. I don't know, Rebecca. The dreaming is strange. We enter it every time we sleep, and it's timeless here, so there's nothing to say we can't enter it from any portal at any point in our lives. This same moment. This same dream."

What was that I just said?

I don't know, but it felt like a revelation, and more it felt like I understood what I was talking about, which I admit happens more in the dreaming than in waking reality these days. Rebecca gives me a quizzical look, but decides not to challenge me on it.

I take one last look at the Dorchester. It would have been nice to have stayed there - even if I was making it all up - and I lead Rebecca down a side street. The traffic noise fades, red brick becomes black with age, then crumbling into the ivy and the bushes that encroach upon it. This transitional dreaming business is coming easier to me now. Is it something to do with what Emma did to me? What did she do, Lewis? Text me back,... the memory fades. All I remember are buxom girls in bondage gear.

Wait,... no I remember,...

We're turning another corner now, pushing through trees, leaving behind the consensus reality of everyone else who has descended upon London in the dreaming, and we return to the growing consensus of our own - to the apex of the cabin soaring before us, warmly lit from within.

"Anyway, you don't wear makeup," I'm saying. "And you don't have a peg-leg. There's something wrong, I know, but I think we can fix it, at least so you don't have to hop to the bathroom. And as for your stick - it's here."

I pull it from a bush and hand it to her. She tests her weight, taps the ground, thinking all the while. "You'll still love me when I'm old?"

"We've only known each other a few days, and anyway, it looks like we're to be spared that particular indignity - growing old I mean."

"You really know how to make a girl feel great, Timothy."

"But,..."

"Oh, there's a *but* is there?"

"If we should be allowed the pleasure of it,... growing old, I mean."

"Yes?"

"Then I will."

"Will what?"

"Love you when you're old. Now throw that stick away, and let's go back to bed before the night gets any stranger."

"I'll still need it in the morning."

I touch my fingertips lightly to her forehead, breathe into them, and through them, into her. "No you won't," I tell her.

She looks strangely at me - startled at first, then still, as if I have mesmerised her. What am I saying? That she's cured? I know I'm dreaming, but I think I mean it, and what's more,...

I think she believes it too.

Chapter 35

I wake to the sound of Rebecca's laughter, and the bed jiggling. We have pushed the twins together, somewhat untidily in our haste last night. They are secured at both foot and head with a stout pair of Rebecca's tights, in order to stop them from sliding apart. Rebecca is seated beside me now, cross legged and gloriously naked as she tries to unroll a condom over me. She keeps getting it the wrong way round and the condom unfurls unhelpfully into a useless wiggly worm. There are empty foils scattered on my chest from previous attempts, her fingertips smeared with an oily gunk whose texture she tests betwixt finger and thumb.

"They're useless," she says. "How ever do people manage?"

That I am erect in the morning is a promising sign - though Rebecca's administrations have something to do with this of course, and the feel of her fingers is exquisite, teasing me back to a time when I was much younger. Take no notice of what I said earlier, Lewis; it is the most amazing thing for a man to wake up next to a woman,... at least a woman who looks as pleased to see him as this.

I regard her through half closed eyes, marvelling in the magnificence of her nudity, and feeling childishly proud that I alone have this knowledge of Rebecca, a knowledge others can only guess at. And oh, what they are missing! Raul would surely like to paint her as I see her now.

She leans across and touches her hand to my forehead, then smears something there with her fingertip - letters, I think. I try to read them in my imagination: an R and an S. She giggles as I screw up my face at the smeary touch, but there's such a tenderness in her eyes I feel the emotion catching in my throat. I love it that she can laugh, that she can find pleasure in the minutiae of life when so many of us these days cannot.

We are richer, safer, healthier than we have ever been. So why the emptiness, Lewis? Do you deny us something? Or do we only imagine your presence, and thereby deny ourselves? Not that any of this matters now, but still I wonder: is it that we are not meant for peaceful times? Are we children built only for adversity, and death?

Are we lost without it, do you think?

"You lied," I tell her.

"Oh?"

"You don't have a Celtic tattoo."

"Well, you would know. You've seen more or less all of me now."

Her breasts are impressively weighty and are thrust from her at the slightest provocation. They strike against my chest as she unfolds her legs and stretches beside me. They are symbolic of another side to her, a substantial part, and normally hidden. I love the weight of them, love the warm weight of her as she snuggles close.

And the sex?

Ah,... the sex, Lewis!

My dear chap, you have no idea!

Rebecca came so quickly, came with my tongue to her bud, came downstairs, out on the deck as the stars wheeled. She came with her eyes upturned and her legs braced taut. She came with a squeal, then a feline roar that echoed from the fells, and then she collapsed in a giggle upon the boards, gathering her skirt and her pants to her breasts, head lolling.

"Doesn't count," she'd said, breathless. "Doesn't count. I want you in me, Tim. In me."

So, I entered her on the steps, as we made our way upstairs. She was wearing only her blouse, going up ahead of me, betwixt banister and stick, and me, mesmerised by the pale coolness of her bare derrière, reaching to touch, to stroke the smooth swell of it with the back of my hand, and she turning then, her eyes pools of hungry black, and her thighs opening, taking me down into their cushion softness.

There was a ravenous kiss, a taste of salt on her lips, and strawberries. Then she was tugging me out and guiding me into centre of her. It had been so long, I'd quite forgotten that moment - you know - the feel of entering a woman: the hot, smooth, surprise of it. It was a surprise too, how eager she was, how ready, how *wanting*. My memories of Miranda, towards the end of our time, had left me unprepared for this erotic sweetness.

I wonder if she is sweeter now, for *him*.

And Rebecca? I remember lips parted suddenly at the feel of me as I filled her. There was just a twinge in the corners of her eyes as the last remnants of her girlhood tore away, but she soaked up the pain of it, rubbed it out with the churning of her pelvis.

"Fuck,... Tim. For such a tiny thing it feels *enormous*!"

Laughter again.

Teasing.

Excitement.

She gave a playful squeal, then wrapped herself around me - arms and legs - to convey a more serious meaning, and the need in her. She was so warm, so eager and so ready I was coming before even I'd pulled open her blouse, felt the glory of her breasts as they spilled into my palms - the deliciously cool cascade of them,..

Oh, God, Lewis,.... Rebecca's breasts!

I shuddered it out, roared into her, then laughed when she sat up, blew a stray lock from her face and said :"Was that it? Pfft. Hardly worth the fuss of getting going."

I lay my head upon her belly, the scent of her filling my imagination with delights yet to come. "No joking, Rebecca. Just for a moment. Please. Let me feel this."

Then her hand was on my head, stroking, reassuring me that what we had done was a good and a tender thing, well meant and deeply felt.

That we had broken nothing.

This, Lewis, *this* is life - not the sex, but more to be so openly and so deeply intimate with another human being. It's like the dreaming; when I wake, how do I know I was really with Rebecca in the dream-scape? How do any of us know the reality of others? How do we know that every detail of our existence is not imagined?

Solipsism is no joke. It is a lonely place, a continent whose boundaries recede the further we explore them, until this is all that's left to us; this touching; this is all we want, all we need, all we crave; this reassurance we are not alone. In any situation that is not irretrievably corrupt, it is love alone that guides us to our proper end.

I know, I know,... even this is something I could be imagining, but if that's so and my life is a delusion, then so is my death and I shall live for ever. But a man's intuitions are not always to be denied by such philosophical conundrums, and in the feel of Rebecca, I feel also a universe expanding, making room for more than just my own narrow point of view.

We have built a bridge tonight. A bridge towards something remarkable.

Chapter 36

So,... the morning after. It comes as no surprise there's none of the awkwardness of youth. We both knew what we were doing. Nor were we carried away on alcohol and a desire to steal something from one another. Rebecca is high on losing and gaining: losing her virginity at the age of forty,... em,... something, and on regaining her prowess as a dancer, all be it in the dream sense. No, it's true, Lewis: I see it in her eyes as she gazes at me now, only inches from my face.

And me? I've lost my reserve for life, and gained what? Gained Rebecca for sure, I hope - but gained also a confidence, something as much from the dream, as from this defining act between a man and a woman.

I still have images of buxom girls in bondage gear at the back of my mind, left over from the dreaming; they seem ridiculous, yet something about them tells me the dream bore a profound significance, for me as much as for Rebecca. Something in the dreaming changed me. It’s a pity though to have waited all my life for this path to open and now there be so little time that remains to follow it.

I ask her if I should make coffee.

"No," she says. "I'll make it. You need to keep your strength up. I've not finished with you yet."

She pushes herself away, slides from bed, takes up her dressing gown and skips girlishly to the door.

And I remember,...

"Rebecca?"

"Hmm?"

"Forgetting something?"

"I know - one sugar and just a little milk. Yuck!"

"I was meaning your stick."

"What?"

See how calmly I mention it? The realisation leaves her slack jawed. She is perfectly poised, perfectly balanced, at first, and it is her mind that questions it, her mind now that has her making a grab for the door frame. I wonder if she'll tumble. I slide from bed, just in case I need to catch her, but she remains steady, breathless - with fear or wonder, I don't know. I had not wanted her to reach

the stair, and realise half way down, then fall.

"Close your eyes," I tell her. "Think now. Remember what it feels like, and walk back to me."

She shakes her head. "I can't, Tim. I can't possibly."

"Why not?"

"Because you look ridiculous with your little man out and standing to attention like that."

Jokes,... my, how Rebecca likes to hide behind her jokes.

"That's why I said to close your eyes."

So she closes her eyes, breathes, but then opens them again, focuses on the bed and walks very slowly, one deliberate foot in front of the other. I feel the stiffness in her as her old balance tries to swing back in charge, but she holds it at bay. There is a limp, and the tight lipped trembling of a ferocious concentration, as she returns to bed. She flops beside me, a little pale.

You see? Such is the power of the mind, Lewis; it can even render us lame when there is no physical reason for it.

"Well done," I tell her. "Now, *I'll* make coffee."

So,...

We have witnessed a miracle of sorts; we make light of it, then retreat into our separate privacies while we accommodate it into mundane reality. This is a dangerous moment; we cannot let it crawl back inside completely, we cannot reject the reality of it or we will lose it. My hands are shaking as I spoon coffee into the cups. I look out through the back window to make sure I'm not dreaming, that this is the cabin of my waking reality, not the one Rebecca adorned with a lake.

There is no lake.

The kettle rumbles on the stove.

What now?

It's like hypnosis, Lewis - a cure in the dreaming. We plant a suggestion. We suggest the person be cured, and sometimes they are. Perhaps illness is like London, last night, in the dreaming. It becomes a fixture because so many think of it, and changing even the slightest thing is difficult when so many others hold things in place the way they are. In the shaman's cure, or even his darker incantations, the secret is the willing of change, and the removal of doubt in the mind of others that things can be any other way.

This is, I think, a significant revelation. But who among us wills the annihilation of the earth? For sure it seems only a superior

power of imagination could out-will an entire planet of sentient beings who would wish the opposite. Is it God that wills it then? And if not God, then why can we not keep safe the earth by our overwhelming collective will? Why can we not bend the trajectory of a rock even the size of greater London, by merely thinking on it?

I return with coffee and toast on a little tray. Rebecca has slid back into bed and is brushing out her hair. She looks magnificent, the blood returning to her cheeks, a sparkle in her eyes. I feel suddenly self conscious; I would like to slide in beside her, but I'm not sure if I should, or if she wants some private time now. Sex is not the same as marriage. It does not dissolve the need for certain intimate permissions.

"I should let you make love to me more often," she says. "If you're going to treat me like this in the mornings."

I sit on the bed as she nibbles the corner off a piece of toast. She's thoughtful for a while, then asks: "What just happened?"

She doesn't remember that part of the dream. She was so high on the dancing, perhaps nothing else registered with her; not the taxi ride, not us being outside the Dorchester Hotel, nor the alley leading back to the cabin,... "It's something,... something from the dream. But we shouldn't talk about it. We promised."

"I know. All right. Maybe it'll come back to me. I mean,... what you did."

"Perhaps."

Again, her hand is reaching for my arm, again the contact, the intravenous shot of intimacy, the claim of possession in the glow of her face and her eyes. But a strangeness is descending. We don't need to talk about it. We have been granted one last miracle, but the days are short now. There will be no time to fathom this. We can only live each moment as it comes and find what joy there is in it.

She opens the duvet and invites me to slide in beside her, offers me a nibble of her toast. The heat of her is exquisite, as is the smoothness of her skin.

What could possibly be more perfect a moment, Lewis, than this?

Chapter 37

I have wound the radio up and twiddled with the aerial. Medium Wave stations are full of wow and hiss, voices are inanely chattering, but indistinct. Commercial jingles assure us there are still products to buy. FM is choppy, but I make out music, something modern. It does not sound like Armageddon, but then I don't know what Armageddon sounds like. They say the orchestra even played as the Titanic went down.

Reception is poor, and we'll need to do better than this. I crank the radio for a bit longer to improve the charge, but the result is no better. Between the mountain and the photovoltaic array on the roof, it's possible there's not much room for frequency modulated waves to wriggle into the cabin, so I take the radio outside. It tweets and rushes powerfully, voices blare hopefully, then fade. I find Radio 4 by the tarn, and sit down with it, coax it in with the dial to a reassuringly rich bass. Ducks take flight in protest.

A pair of scientists are talking about nano-particles and the risk to health. I'm wondering why this is even considered relevant now. There's a sense of normality. I'd imagined the silence following a nuclear burst, a world laid to waste, handfuls of survivors bent over radios, warming batteries in their pockets in order to boost their charge. But remember, Lewis, the Western leadership is preaching normality. There is a momentum, I suppose, that the world will carry on as normal for a time. I allow myself a flicker of hope that all will be well, but I note a part of me is disappointed too that the world can be so resistant to change.

It's a few minutes to the hour. Maybe the news will enlighten us, Lewis. Maybe the news will show us where the cracks in this apparent normality are.

I have given Rebecca space, left her in the bedroom contemplating her walking stick. This is a thing she must either befriend or dismiss alone. I'm here if she needs me. I hear the door slide open, and she steps out upon the deck, a hand shielding her eyes from the rising sun. She has her stick, but is not leaning on it so much, seems almost to treat it now as an accessory while her gait appears normal, the stick touching down in time with her steps, but not aiding them as much as before.

She's taking it slow.

Absorbing it slowly.

A lot has happened here.

The dream was unlike any other I can remember, if only for the parts of it I cannot remember, though I understand that might not make much sense to you. There is a censor who hides things, but not enough that I am left unaware of the dream's significance, and it will come back to me. I remember Emma now, remember a thin blade, like the ones my girls sometimes carry. And I remember a pain for which Emma was both the cause and the healing. And what she left in me was the cause of both my own healing,... and Rebecca's.

No Lewis. I am not a magician; Rebecca's symptoms were purely psychical, her cure was simply to believe *in* me. I planted the suggestion while we slept, planted it while we inhabited that other world of dreams.

This is what shamans do, I'm told.

Sometimes it *works*.

Rebecca comes down by the water and sits - still a little stiff, testing herself as she descends. Her legs curl up naturally, and with a dancer's ease, into a graceful lotus. She sweeps her fingertip through the water - an arc-like motion, full of sparkles, striking upon the mirror blackness, so the ripples spread upon the surface, capturing sunbeams in them.

"I can walk," she says.

"You always could."

"You know what I mean. And I remember now, in the dream. What you said. What you did. Thank you, Tim."

"You're welcome."

"But how can it be?"

"Don't question it,... just trust in it. Is there not a tradition of healing in your own ministry?"

"My what?"

"You told me you were an ordained priestess?"

She nods. "I did 'fess up to that didn't I? I thought it might impress you, that's all."

"It did."

"It's played down these days," she says. "The healing I mean. It's a field that's been tarnished somewhat by charlatans over the centuries. I needed a heathen like you, rather than one of my own."

"Maybe I'm not so irredeemably heathen as you think."

She twinkles. "I didn't say you were irredeemable, Timothy. We're both on the same path."

"The path of a transcendent truth?"

She sighs. "Let's say I think our interpretations of the truth add up the same thing."

"Maybe."

"Oh, I know - bored Anglican that you were. How can a dusty old vicar know anything about the truth when his every utterance was enough to send you to sleep?" She plucks an egg sized stone from the shore of the tarn and tosses it to me. "Catch." It lands with a wet slap in my palm. "Do you remember anything of your Bible stories, heathen? And has it never puzzled you how many times the word stone appears?"

"I don't remember ever thinking about it much."

"No,... you were locked in a one dimensional, literal interpretation of things, which is why those stories never made any sense to you. But there's more in them than you think."

"Sticks and stones?"

"Stone is truth, Tim. It's an earthly thing, it is of the earth, and we can all pick it up, turn it in our hands, marvel at it, interpret it how we like, but our understanding is usually pretty basic. We see only the literal truth in it. And that kind of truth is nothing without the goodness inside of us to bring it alive. It's the goodness that enables us to live the truth, to feel it, viscerally. And that goodness comes from God. The gift of instinct and a goodness that transcends faith. We're both trying to connect with what is good inside ourselves."

"This asteroid? How big a rock is that? And what kind of truth is that?"

She laughs. "Nature is what it is, Tim. And sometimes, though we're pretty damned smart, we can't always get out of the way fast enough."

"Which seminary did you say you went to?"

She smiles, mysteriously. "Here endeth the lesson."

The news comes through suddenly, interrupting my astonishment.

The row over the Russian and Chinese pronouncement yesterday continues. The European and American authorities restate their assurances that the asteroid is not on a collision course - just a close pass. But the motorways and arterial roads of the United Kingdom

have become grid-locked, especially on the approaches to major airports - Heathrow, Manchester, Birmingham, Glasgow. Around each there is now an impassible zone of some twenty miles radius. All long-haul flights are fully booked - not a seat to be had. Airline websites have crashed. The story is the same in France, Germany, Sweden. People are flying east and west. Our leaders can say what they like, but no one believes them, and those with the money to do so are bailing out.

I hear politicians hee-hawing, calling for calm, calling for clarity. I hear the PM opining that the Western authorities can be no clearer than they have already been. More hee-hawing, calls for studies, calls for science, calls for data.

Sigh.

At least they're debating it.

I suppose the time to be really worried is when the government itself decamps from Westminster and is spirited away from some secret base aboard a very fast jet. Perhaps they're already in negotiations with Australia, or America - as a purely precautionary measure of course. Would the United States even contemplate hosting the United Kingdom government in exile? Or will we be cast upon the mercy of the less Machiavellian of our former colonies? And what, pray, will there be left to govern anyway? And what can governments do when the real power is in the automatic teller machine?

To be sure, Lewis, the "market" has controlled civilisation for so long. It has fed it, stifled it, and corrupted it in equal measure, and has now well and truly put paid to it, whether this asteroid hits us or not.

It puzzles me.

I had thought the science more precise than this.

We can launch a tiny probe into the depths of interstellar space, after a slingshot mission around every planet in the solar system, yet we cannot agree on the trajectory of a rock the diameter of greater London - cannot even agree if it is the diameter of London, or the diameter of Penrith, or the size of a small car.

We argue vociferously, debate ad-nauseum. Results are minimal, and in any case, futile; it will hit or it will miss, and talking about it will make no difference to either outcome.

Trading has been suspended in London. Trading in Hong Kong and Shanghai continues briskly. Currencies are seeing a storm of

activity, Sterling and the Euro are plummeting, the Dollar holding steady, the eastern currencies soaring. The future shape of the hole in the earth is already being simulated by the hole in its financial markets.

Governments urge the banks to reinstate the ATMs and card payments. But the banks, under siege by their retail customers, are saying nothing. Petrol stations are empty - their fuel transferred last night by panic buying into the tanks of vehicles. Supermarkets have not opened today. No one has gone to work, except for the machinery of government, and, it seems, the BBC. Already there is talk of nationalising our pensions, so they can be raided to pay for basic services. You're welcome Lewis. Mine's a pittance, and listening to all of this I don't think I'm going to need it any more.

If only I'd had the guts to do something else with my life!

I could have left the school years ago.

I could have used the money my parents left me - used it sensibly to build something useful.

I could have fucking done something!

Oh, quit whining, Timothy.

There is no other news. Normal scheduling continues. The announcer links us into an incongruous cultural appreciation of the works of Michelangelo.

While she listens, Rebecca continues to run her fingers through the waters of the tarn. She's looking out, dreaming upon the view, no indication she's even been listening. The battery fades and the sounds die to a white hiss. I make to wind it up but an almost subliminal shake of her head dissuades me.

She wants no more.

It's not helping.

I click it off and we sit in silence for a while, suspended in a void; no information; no truth we can rely upon; just us, alone, on the mountain, and nothing of any certainty beyond the reality of this moment. She turns to me then, lifts the hem of her skirt, runs her fingers unselfconsciously along the white line of her scar, continues up into the soft curls between her thighs - she wears no pants this morning. Her fingers linger there as she looks at me. I feel the stillness in her, then the query in the arch of her brow.

I'm sorry Lewis, perhaps you're expecting more from us - the Priestess and the Shaman - something cerebral and spiritual, perhaps even a miracle to avert what might or might not be

coming. You do not expect us to fritter away our remaining days simply making love. But why not? Why are you even there, still listening to me? Go home. Make love, my friend. Find someone you like and even if you do not love them, at least be loving to them. Find the goodness in yourself. It's really all we have to go on, this touching of others. It's why we crave it so; it's the only reassurance we have that we are not alone.

That we are truly alive.

I tug open my trousers and let her hand swim inside, let her play a while, tease me out with the shocking coolness of her palm. Then she sits astride, facing, and we embrace tight, my head sinking to her breasts. She pulls her blouse open for me, already aware of my attachment to this part of her, the part of most comfort, the press of soft breasts against my cheek.

"Afraid yet?" she asks.

"No. Not in this moment."

"Me neither."

She wriggles a little closer, and I slide into her as if programmed from birth. I feel her depth, she feels my girth, lightly gripping, sensing me as if plugged in and communicating soul to soul. Then something electric comes through the earth and enters us. We shudder in unison.

She smiles. "This feels so *good*, Tim."

The morning is beautiful. The sun climbs to noonday, burning away the clouds to an unblemished blue. The fells around are topped with a line of white fire, suggestive of something leaking from the earth, or something sparking from the heavens - the same thing that is sparking through us now, filling my head and my heart with a delirious lack of care. Rebecca moves slowly, riding the waves of the morning. Her eyes are closed.

No joking now.

This might take some time.

Let us enjoy it in peace,..

For the record, if such there be any more, Lewis, and going forward, let me state that it isn't that we are not afraid. But in the collapse of all we have ever known, we realise there is also a freedom in it, because only now do we fully appreciate how all we have ever known, until this moment, is a kind of slavery. Whatever happens now, be it hit or miss, things will never be the same between you and me.

Do you understand this, my friend?

And afterwards,...

We pick vegetables. The mountain is silent above us, massive and immutable in the truth of its hardness, and our softness. We wind the radio at 5 p.m. and listen for more news but hear nothing we do not already know.

We blend and boil the vegetables into a soup, which we eat with a wedge of bread and a knob of butter. You'll have to forgive my obsession with minutiae, for there is such a sharpness to everything now, a level of sensation I have never known before, but which I suppose must always have been there. Indeed, there seems to be a revelation in even the scent and the taste of the world these days, things of far more importance, and pleasure than the fevered rise and fall of the currency markets.

Are the traders still sitting at their terminals, I wonder? Are they still making their manic calculations? Or have they too kicked back, like Rebecca and I, and awakened to the scent at last of their coffee? I'm told they are rich men, those traders, richer even than princes. I trust their gold has bought them safe passage to a slower death than mine.

How much, Lewis?

How much of what we did was real? And how much of what we did merely fed the machine, a machine built on corrupt thought and faulty logic, a machine that will not survive us? What will be the Dollar-Sterling exchange rate at the moment of impact? Who knows? Who cares? Would we not have better fed a few more hungry mouths, and loosened the knot in our hearts, rubbed the salve of goodness into our calcified compassion, anything than spend our lives locked in this useless obsession with the movement of money?

I feel the tweed of my jacket sleeve, imagine the clatter of the loom that wove it, imagine the trials of the man who worked the pedals. I see my father's watch - the reddish gold of the case gleaming now on Rebecca's wrist, imagine the craftsmen who put it together. All useless now, yet there remains a beauty in them, an expression of some kind of truth residing at a level deeper than is touched by our money-machinations. Yet more vital than any of our crafts, Lewis, it is our senses, our window on this world I realise we should have cherished the most, that what we have done on earth is of far less importance than the level of emotional maturity we have

attained at the moment we come to leave it.

I admit I don't score highly in this regard; too cynical and jaded, for sure; these are the marks of an immature and prematurely wearied spirit; nor can I hope to curry favour by redressing such serious shortcomings in so short a time as that remaining. If the Buddhists are right, then I'm most likely due another turn or two at life. But it will have to be a different time-line, a parallel universe where the earth has a longer future than it does in this.

I don't know how much of what I'm saying now is nonsense, how much is true.

Different time-lines?

Different lives?

What the hell does that mean?

Rebecca has brought wine from a case she keeps in the camper, and enjoys a glass of red as we sit out on the rear deck. The sun has swung round and is warming the planks again. She pours me a glass and sets it out so the sunlight catches it. She means to tease me, but I shall not drink it. One sip will take my sense of smell for days.

"There's also a lot of wine in the Bible stories," I tell her.

"Ah, yes. The wedding at Cana. Water into wine." She smiles. "Water first poured into stone jars. It's not why I drink."

"I know why you drink."

"Oh?"

"Because the world hurts."

She nods. "Only when it lies. But the lies have a way of getting under your skin, don't they."

"Only when you start to wake up. So, Reverend,... what does the wine mean?"

"Ah,... well, before we get to the wine, first we must consider the water. Water is the goodness in man, it is his soul. We move from the literal truth of the stone jars, the written word of God, to the living of it. But the miracle of the wine is the water's transformation into something much richer, a truth that intoxicates. This was the miracle at Cana. At least my interpretation of it."

"I'll go along with that."

She smiles, raises her glass. "Amen, brother."

The night grows warm and we sit out late, a companionable silence between us. I read the remains of Emma's journal by the light of a candle, fat moths circling. Rebecca searches the Short Wave stations for a less parochial view on our predicament. She

finds only the World Service and the Voice of America, neither of whom seem overly concerned, though a talking head laments the needless panic and hints at emergency legislation being drafted in order to encourage a recalcitrant citizenry back to work.

Good luck with that one, Lewis.

There are also shrill voices from China, piercing a storm of static, but I do not understand them. Then Singapore radio is broadcasting in English. Rebecca coaxes it in. RBR 1786 has been unofficially renamed Nibiru, at least on the conspiracy forums - that much was predictable, I suppose. It should have hit on the eve of 2012, they say - but hey, who's counting? Russian astronomers meanwhile, are more imaginative, calling it Orcus, Roman deity, better known to the Greeks as Hades, either way come to plunge us into darkness, to snatch fair Persephone down into the depths of the underworld.

There will be a season of cold, but she will return and the earth shall live again.

With or without us.

I would have preferred Shiva, Goddess of destruction and renewal.

Nature is what it is.

China is throwing open its doors, Russia too - border controls are to be relaxed for anyone carrying a European Union passport. Vast camps are proposed for the biggest influx of refugees in history. But I would not like to spend a Russian winter in a tent. The United States remains wary, accusing the East of trying to embarrass it, diplomatically, by not offering the same open-door concessions - concessions it maintains are entirely unnecessary, because RBR 1786 - they refuse to call it Orcus or Nibiru, or anything else - will be passing us by harmlessly.

A shuttle of Chinese and Russian aircraft will be made available, ready to extract citizens from every major air terminal in Europe. I try to do the maths in my head, but my brain refuses to make the necessary connections and offers up the belief instead that it will take ten thousand jet airliners flying nose to tail a whole year to accomplish such an extraordinary evacuation.

This smacks of diplomatic posturing.

Rebecca draws near, leans her shoulder against mine and gazes up into the night. She points to the sky. "Look, the stars are moving."

Airliners are crossing west to east, east to west, and more of them than usual, I think, but they are so high we cannot hear them, and see only the blinking of their lights. We don't know what it means, but our imagination works it up into an evacuation, like the ones just described on the radio - at least for those who can afford it.

"The world is leaving us behind," she muses. "Abandoning us to our fate."

"Hmm?"

"Sounds like you've already abandoned me."

"Sorry,... I was just reading this last bit of the journal."

"Let me see?"

Emma is writing about the dream state, placing it in a dimension beyond our ken.

It fits perfectly the mood of the evening.

We have so many lives before us and behind us, which in reality lie side by side. There is an infinity of room for every possible permutation we can think of, and no need to fear that final fall of night, for in fearing it, we risk diminishing all our lives.

Can our past influence our future? Naturally it can, but so too our future can influence the present moment, though we be unaware of it, for the dreaming does not stop when we awaken. Our lives have more dimensions than we are ordinarily aware of.

Our life moves in time, a straight line we imagine, but in the dreaming we have full cognizance of it from birth to death. Then life becomes a plane as everything we've done can be changed, for good or ill. From another perspective we see this, when we become the observer of our thoughts, raised still one dimension higher. At any moment we can be engaged anywhere in an infinity of possibility, an infinity of lines through time, for all time. In this way are we eternal. And the only thing holding us on a particular course are memories of the life we've led.

These are shed in sleep, and need not be recovered.

The last words of the journal appear to be nonsense, a string of blocked capitals:

ERDEHTF ANEWPMO MEEWFUT AEWXIJI SDOULDK WONLYAS EDREAMX

"A cipher, perhaps?" says Rebecca? "A word puzzle?"

"But why hide something, when she's already said so much that's extraordinary?"

"She's an esotericist, Tim. Worse, maybe even an Hermeticist.

They're all about initiation, and hiding truths from those who aren't ready for them."

"She can be slippery all right, and infuriatingly opaque. Like your Bible."

"Perhaps you could ask your cloud snooper to untangle it for us?"

"Lewis? Oh, he's just a listener. There'll be other departments for decryption. It depends if he thinks it's important enough or if he thinks I'm just winding him up by making a record of it."

Rebecca closes the journal and sets it aside. "Maybe it's a line from a poem or something."

She kisses me then - a warm, lingering moistness to it. I taste strawberries and onions on her breath, and all of this is so exquisite I cannot help but revel in it. If these are to be among the last recordings of sentient life on earth, I want my say. I want future visiting space aliens to know that for all of our material achievements here, I felt this simple thing and valued it above all else - that *this* is what it once meant to be a human being.

And it was good.

Chapter 38

Rosy's engine, like all those old air-coolers, has a comforting, metallic rattle. She's a little underpowered for her size, and has a liking for climbing the camber of the road, but by the time we come down to the A591, we've made friends.

Rebecca has asked me to drive because she says she wants to smoke. She's opened the window and is taking a luxurious drag on a thin cigar, one foot resting nonchalantly upon the dash.

"Aren't you afraid those things will kill you?" I ask.

She responds with a look that tells me what a stupid thing this is to say under the circumstances.

She's different this afternoon. She's wearing a dark blue trouser suit with a pale blue blouse and the collar of a priestess. We're not sure what we'll find on the road - if there will be chaos or calm, if there will be rule of law or anarchy. I am hoping that in any collapse of order there is a momentum that will keep things going for a while, that people will keep turning up for work, if only from sheer habit.

She has assuaged my fears for her safety by convincing me the big tattooed bruisers who haunt both my waking and dreaming realities are less likely to ravish a woman if she is a vicar - for even the godless, she says, fear the wrath of God should harm befall His emissaries. And anyway, she says, lady vicars are born with perfect form – without vaginas.

I mean, *everybody* knows that, Tim!

I'm wondering about the suit, because I've dreamed of her wearing it for weeks now. I'm also wondering about that wild bush of hair and how it now hangs catwalk straight and shiny - and what kind of woman packs a suit and hair straighteners on a holiday to the Lakes? A resourceful one, certainly, except of course,...

She reads my expression and cracks a grin.

"Slow-coach. It took you a while to work that one out. I've been sitting here for ages, for miles and miles and miles, wondering when you'd twig."

Dreamshock!

Got you there, Lewis, didn't I?

Got myself too. It's becoming a habit, I'm afraid.

I'm waiting at the junction with the A591, at the little

roundabout. Do you know it? The road across leads to Windermere, the right to Ambleside, while to the left is the long climb out of the Lakes, to Kendal and beyond, to the M6. Cars have stopped, waiting for me to proceed. How polite under the circumstances, I'm thinking. Except there are no circumstances here, other than what we make them. It's all very real, but then some people's dreams are like that – mine included.

"I don't even know where we're going."

She laughs and pulls the wheel to the left. "Neither do I. Does it matter? Let's just cruise around for a bit. See where we end up."

She's looking at me, smiling, teasing. Such lovely, arresting eyes! We take the Kendal road, and head for the M6.

"Sorry, Rebecca. You look so different."

"It freaks you out doesn't it? This vicar thing. But I'm the same girl, Tim. Just a different uniform."

No, it's more than a uniform.

I know we're dreaming this, but it marks a change in her. It's symbolic of course, as are all things in the dreaming; it heralds the flowering of something new, and yes it does freak me out a little, to quote the vernacular.

I don't know why.

I suppose there's the necessary distance imposed by her robes of office, and I resent any kind of distance between me and Rebecca. It's the dream telling me this. In waking reality I am more rational. The dream is telling me she possesses insights into the Christian liturgy that were never explained to me, that she can make sense of things that have always been lifeless and blank. She should be explaining these things to others, but I want her all to myself, both her insights and her vagina, for I am not so spiritually advanced I cannot be weighed down by my own attachments.

Who of us is?

Anyway,...

We're still miles from the motorway, Rosy thrumming reassuringly as we make way at a steady fifty. Big cars are overtaking us - expensive saloons and four by fours, flashing by at impressive speed. I wonder if they are the rats leaving the sinking ship. I wonder how much the dream reflects reality, or if these are just my prejudiced expectations of the moneyed classes.

Rebecca frowns. "I hope they've booked their flights, or they'll be disappointed. And how will they pay when cards aren't working?"

"Perhaps the cards of rich men are different. I don't know. And anyway, we should be careful of reading all of this literally. We're seeing what we expect to see. And we expect the rich to be ahead of the stampede, and the poor,... well, the poor nowhere, because that's how it's always been - only more-so of late - I mean the end of the world as we knew it."

"Since news of the asteroid?"

"No, since the crash of '08 and the global neo-con ascendency."

She gives me a smirk which at once deflates my self important ranting. "Do you even know what that means, or did you just make it up?"

"I don't know. It doesn't matter. It's all over now. And you know what? I feel great."

She laughs. "Me too, though I'm probably going to die on the 17th." She counts the days on her fingers. "A little over a week to go, and I don't care. I feel better now than I've ever felt in my life. Is that normal, do you think? Or are we still in denial?"

"Maybe that's it. Or maybe we just see things differently now. On the one hand it's terrible, the end of everything. But on the other we finally have enough. We finally have the one thing we've been working for all our lives - enough to live and just,... *be*. Just not for very long."

"We should think of it as less of a disaster then and more of a miracle?"

I shoot her a look and detect not a trace of sarcasm.

"A miracle? Yes, why not?"

We hit the tail end of the traffic a little to the north of Kendal. There's still six miles to the motorway, but we're going nowhere now. There's a big black four by four with dark tinted windows weaving about in front, looking for a way to jump the queue, to muscle through, because this is what big black four by fours do in both the literal and the archetypal reality. But the queue is six miles long, and the reason for that is there's another queue, maybe forty or fifty miles long on the M6. All of us, even the rich are humbled by it.

"It's worse than I thought."

A helicopter roars overhead, flying low, navigating by the road - not the police or the ambulance, so far as I can tell, but a private conveyance, a mighty chariot carrying foreign dignities away from their summer retreat in the English Lakes, because the English

Lakes is about to become one big lake, full of sea.

Ah, I had forgotten the uber wealthy, those wealthy enough to transcend the inconveniences of the ground, those whose wealth exceeds that of nations. But the stone truth is a great leveller. And we shall all be dead in a week.

Rebecca muses: "Now might be a good time to invest in property. I bet the prices around here are at an all time low."

"Ha!"

Satnavs are being pressed into action. Buttons tapped, re-routes sought. Vehicles shoot off down the quiet lanes at breakneck speed, all of them roads to nowhere. It could almost be real! I suppose the satellites we put in orbit will survive, beaming their positional information down for centuries - the only functioning technology we'll leave behind. It will no doubt puzzle those passing space aliens that there is no one left on earth requiring direction.

"Rebecca?"

"Hm?"

"What are we doing?"

She gives a shrug, content to go along with things. "I don't know." She unclips her belt and squeezes through into the back. I'm sure this is isn't possible in a real camper, but it seems to work all right here. Her peachy derrière brushes my cheek and I fight the urge to bite it. This does not seem appropriate - she being a vicar now, and I feel a strange double stranded twist of guilt and resentment of that guilt accordingly.

"Fancy a brew?" she asks.

"Sure."

I look at the belt across my own lap. There's a sixty pound fine for not wearing it. I glimpse in the mirror at the guy in the Merc behind me yakking into his mobile 'phone. (A thousand pound fine and three penalty points) His horn blares at us as he squeezes through and tries to follow the assertive four by four. Rebecca jerks in surprise and drops a cup, catches it before it smashes.

"Oh, for heavens sake! Calm down, people."

I take a breath and unclip the belt, release myself into carelessness. I am forty nine going on ten years old. I have about fifty quid in my wallet, plus a debit card and a credit card. I take it out of my pocket where it has lain like an unsightly pus-filled lump all my adult life, and I toss it out of the window.

Rebecca squeezes back into her seat and hands me a mug of

steaming cocoa. "Have you thought about what might happen if the asteroid misses?"

"No, I seem to be convinced that it won't."

"You and a lot of other people by the looks of it. But what if it *does* miss? Can you imagine it: first day back at school and Strickland sitting there like the pompous ass he's always been, flicking up his first Powerpoint of the day. What will we do?"

"He won't be there. He'll still be in Oz, where he's fled like all the other assertive, odiously moneyed rats."

"Oh, come now, a headmaster's salary might be double ours but it doesn't put him the league of odium. His personality alone achieves that. But if he *is* there, Timothy. What then?"

"I don't understand."

"Well, are you just going to sit there like you used to do and take it up the arse, or are you going to speak your mind for a change? Imagine it for a moment. A week ago, the most people were afraid of was losing their jobs and not having enough money to live. Now it's death itself we're contemplating. I don't think we're going to go back to being fed the same old rubbish as before. Are we?"

"You mean it could be a good thing?"

"Or a disaster. We need money to eat, and to get money we must work. Generation upon generation have tried to escape that trap, and failed. Wordsworth, Coleridge - even they were going to set up some kind of hippy commune. I mean they were young, and their plans make me titter at their naivete. And then there was Tolstoy - all those agrarian communes he spawned - all over the world, and they all failed - every single one - for the simple fact that people couldn't get on with each other, and they hadn't a clue how to grow their own food properly, and were too squeamish to wring the neck off a chicken."

The traffic is hopeless, and we're wasting dream time sitting in it. There's no traffic at all heading north, so I swing Rosy around and we head back into the Lakes. There's some confusion at an unfamiliar roundabout, and we end up driving off at a tangent. Suddenly we're cruising along a narrow lane, flanked by hedgerows and drystone walls. Fertile meadows are lying fallow, rising to the grey heights of unfamiliar fells. I've no idea where we are. We seem to drive for miles, then come down to an open green and a sign that tells us we have just entered the village of Fairford. Again. Up ahead is a duck pond, a cricket field and the whitewashed walls of

the Half Moon Inn.

Rebecca greets it with a laugh and presses her hands together. "Oh, I love being inside your head," she says. "Everything's so compact and neat - in an incomprehensible sort of way."

"How do you know it's my head we're in. I thought we'd concluded the dreamspace was something other, an independent dimension."

"True,... still, we must influence it along the lines of our own thoughts, Tim. And, *you're* driving."

"Fairford's up by Penrith. North Lakes. This is South."

"Fairford doesn't exist, remember? Who was it that said: *geography is a redundant concept in the dreaming*?"

"I think it was me. Or it might have been Emma. Either way, it's a good point."

We park by the cricket pitch. Men in whites are playing village cricket. A small crowd has gathered to watch. A round of polite applause follows the whack of wood on leather. Rebecca applauds too. "Oh, jolly good. Did you see?"

As near as I can work out it's Monday in waking reality. They would not be playing a match on a Monday. Is it still Sunday then?

I ask her: "You're into cricket?"

"Yes, I used to play - they allow girls now you know?"

"They do?"

"I think so, or I may just be dreaming it. I mean, of course I know I'm dreaming. Can one be dreaming in the dreaming? Perhaps it means something. Phew, I'm getting confused. I need a drink." She steps out of the van and breathes deep. "Well, the weather's a lot nicer than the last time we were here."

"We were never here, even the first time. So, do you fancy a glass of warm beer and a sandwich? I may join you in a pint this time."

"You don't drink."

"Well, if you can smoke and catch no harm, I can have a glass of beer, since we're only dreaming."

"All right then, except you've just thrown your wallet away. That means I'll have to pay."

I pull the wallet from my pocket with the sleight of hand that only dreams allow, and fan a wad of twenties at her - no need for ATMs here. Money is relegated to an entirely symbolic concept. She takes a twenty and makes for the bar to place our order.

We sit outside the pub, the sun reflecting strongly from the whitewashed walls. Rebecca dons a pair of sunglasses and applauds another six from across the road. A couple are just leaving, the man notices Rebecca first, or rather he notices the uniform of the priesthood, then notices me. He doesn't seem altogether surprised - but then he's dreaming too.

"Mr. Magowan?"

It's John Whittaker, junior, dreaming with his wife again. He does not look lucid, something unfocussed about him - dare I say a little dreamy - or is this the deeper insight of the dreaming, courtesy of Emma's initiation?

"Mr. Whittaker."

He hovers, uncertain of the etiquette. His wife looks much younger than he, a startling strawberry blonde with a pale skin and freckles and sparkly eyes, perhaps as he imagines her from their youth. She says nothing, but hangs upon his arm. She has an expression that suggests she knows more than she's letting on, that she is merely a spectator in here, this place between the worlds. I indicate the empty seats. "Won't you join us? This is my friend, the em,... Reverend Becky Rayworth."

He sits, looks once more at Rebecca, smiles awkwardly. "Well, what are we to do, Mr. Magowan? What *ever* are we to do?"

I take it he's talking about the asteroid.

"Not much we can do, Mr. Whittaker." I shrug, my attention drawn by the sound of leather on wood again, and a gentle patter of polite applause. "Enjoy the last of England, I suppose, the last of the summer. At least the weather's being kind. Better this summer than last - last summer was a washout."

I'm not sure this is what he wants to hear. In the absence of any solid information from our leaders, people will rely on any old hearsay for their news. Except, remember Lewis, none of this is happening.

"I'm told the airports are restricting flights," he says. "That seats are being sold for extortionate amounts of money. I mean, my life savings wouldn't even cover it. They call it the law of supply and demand."

"That's one way of putting it. Amoral profiteering is another. But we've talked of this before, Mr Whittaker. Like a nuclear holocaust, there's no escape - just two choices: die fast or die slow. Why waste one’s life's savings on the second option? The last news we had

there are no flights anyway. All have been booked. And the means of booking them and paying for them has now crashed. Better to settle in and enjoy the show."

He sighs. "Quite. My father tells me the same thing. He's closed the shop and gone fishing today. And you, Mr. Magowan. What will you be doing - I mean, how will you be seeing things out, so to speak?"

"We'll probably head back up to my cabin."

"Perhaps that's wise. I mean away from the more populated byways. Who knows how those who are left behind will react. Tell me, did that old journal turn out to be of any interest?"

Rebecca smiles. "Very interesting indeed."

"Emma Hollander is an insightful lady," I tell him.

"I had the feeling it would be just the sort of thing to appeal to you."

I ask him about Penrith.

"The town was very quiet this morning," he recalls. "I suppose those with money have simply taken off. Chaos on the motorway of course. The junction up by the town is simply impossible. Both carriageways - north and south jammed for hundreds of miles they say. I managed to sneak out via the back roads."

"You say the town's quiet?"

"Oh yes, no violence or looting or anything like that. This is Penrith we're talking about, not London. You can even get supplies from the supermarket. The manager's staying on, I'm told, a few staff as well - all local people of course and nowhere else to go, even supposing they had the means to get there in the first place."

"More profiteering, no doubt?"

"Oh no,... nothing like that. I suppose foodstuffs will spoil if they can't be sold, so they're giving it all away. There's rationing of course, and quite a long queue for not much at the end of it, and when what little of it is gone it'll be gone for ever. But,...well,... extraordinary times, eh?"

"Giving things away? Whatever next?"

He smiles. "I shall open my own doors as well, I think, though I suspect books aren't much of a priority in people's minds right now."

"Quite,... but haven't you felt it, Mr Whittaker? There's something else in all of this,... a sense of,..."

Rebecca nods and finishes my sentence. "Freedom."

He smiles. "You know, I was thinking the same thing this morning. Why worry over what can't be altered? We should just spend the remaining days doing what we have always wanted to do."

"Exactly."

“Then I suppose, “ says his wife – and this is the first time I’ve heard her speak, so I am drawn up by her opening words and hang upon them. “I suppose the secret is knowing what it is you have always wanted.”

She’s right, of course. She speaks with some of the riddle language of the dead, or of the Faery. But I understand her now, here, in this place, more than I fear I shall in waking reality. Waking reality robs us of so many of our finer faculties.

"Well, we'll be moving on, I think," say Whittaker.

"Good to see you, Mr Whittaker,... and Mrs."

His wife nods, looks serenely at us. We watch them go.

"Strange," Rebecca says.

"Oh?"

"What did that mean - all that stuff about Penrith? Is he recalling it from inside the dream, or from his memory of reality?"

"I don't know. And what about his wife? That thing she said. Do you know?”

“Do I know what?”

“What it is you’ve always wanted?”

She smiles evasively. “Of course. Don’t you?”

“Men are simple creatures. Peace, and a week long orgasm. You?”

She laughs. “I’m finding it with you, much to my surprise.”

“Thanks.”

“You’re such an unlikely companion Mr Magowan. You should smile more. When you frown your expression is enough to curdle milk and frighten horses.”

“It is? Then I shall smile more. I promise.”

“Peace. Yes. There is peace in this, and I note you placed it before the orgasm, which is encouraging, though clearly we intend practising towards the latter as much as we can. And we should perhaps take more care.”

“More care.”

She inhales slowly, deliberately, fills her lungs, expands her chest, luxuriating in the imagined freshness of the dream-air, then

breathes out peace. "We're neither of us children any more, Mr Magowan, so how we managed to avoid putting out our backs making love in the shower last night, I'll never know."

"We made love in the shower?"

"You don't remember?"

"No,... "

"You're shocked?"

"Em,... actually, I was thinking if it's true,... for a woman of no sexual experience, you're catching on really fast."

"That's as may be, but we're getting far too old for that sort of thing. Our enthusiasm might yet be our undoing. As for our backs, the morning will tell." She reaches over, interlaces her fingers with mine and I feel a shock of warmth at a touch more real than real. "Is this what it will be like, do you think?" she asks. "After the shock, come fall of night, the two of us, wandering a mutual dream in a pea green camper called Rosy? For ever?"

"I can think of worse ways to spend eternity."

"I hope we can go on being together," she says. "It seems so strange to have discovered you so late in life as this, when we've only days left now to explore it."

"I know. My fault for not taking more notice of you when you started at the school last year."

"That's all right. You were far too distracted by Amelia Grey's flirty little bottom."

"Amelia Grey's bottom is flirty, yes, but little? Definitely not."

People at the tables nearby are looking at us, or rather at me making so bold with a priestess. I feel their confusion and their resentment at this display of familiarity. Would it be the same if I were the priest and she my consort? I remove my hand, retreat cautiously, feel again the awkwardness and a distance now growing between us.

She pretends not to notice, but we both know it's significant. My magnanimity at the coming fall of night is only on account of her presence. The thought we may not be bound on the same path for eternity raises a flicker of doubt and a cry of panic that I must quickly stifle.

I cannot do this without her. But she is a Priestess and belongs to others, not to me.

I look at the watch on her wrist, wonder again at the significance, that it is my father's watch, and how I should read it,

like I should have read the significance in stone and wine all those years ago. But as usual I cannot fathom the metaphor, am too earth bound and look for the literal meaning of time, try to gauge how long we might have left before waking. The watch says half past three, but is that afternoon in the dreaming, or the small hours of the sleeping? The watch also tells me the moon is coming up to full, which, as I recall is the opposite of true - that the moon in reality is in the dark phase now, which means a potent time for dreaming.

"Time to go?" she asks.

"I don't know - I'm amazed we've hung on as long as this. I was just wondering where to go next. But this is your dream as much as mine. Is there nothing you want to explore while we're here?"

She lifts her hand to the collar, checks it with her fingertips. "I think I'd like to go to Church, if that's okay. It's about time I put in an appearance."

I look across to the steeple of Fairford Church, but she shakes her head. "There's one I've seen on the road, close by where we cut up to the cabin. That's more my parish, I think."

I know the one she means, an old place, nestled in a deep valley, built of dry slate courses, as is the style of the Lakes. I'm not sure how we get there from here, but assume it is merely a question of setting out, following where the roads take us and allowing our imaginations to reveal the way.

Chapter 39

Rosy is quiet as we travel. She lends her own emphasis to what is now a growing silence between Rebecca and I. There's a difference between a vicar and a priestess of course, and Rebecca is revealing now her own lack of ease. She would be a priestess, I think, but the role of vicar is the nearest thing allowable in western society for a woman. And then again, it's one thing to assume a disguise, quite another to assume a role.

The church reveals itself at the end of a plausible shortcut, along a forested section of narrow road. The fells are at once familiar. I see the road up to the cabin, I see the spire of the church in the valley below. We come down to it in silence, and Rebecca steps out, pausing a moment to look about as if she has lost something.

"You okay?"

"My stick. I want my stick."

I imagine one for her, draw it from behind my seat. "Will this one do?"

"Hmm. Very nice. But I was just remembering how I don't really need it. Old habits die hard, don't they?"

"And when you are least confident in yourself, you need the stick more. Have you noticed?"

"I do?"

Gravestones fill the ancient burial ground. They are lichen covered, and crusty. Their dates speak of the centuries. We've gained much in material terms by dint of reason, but these people went to their deaths filled with more faith than we will ever know. They were not empty, as we are mostly empty now.

Though I am still dreaming, I'm lucid enough to know the church exists for real. As Rebecca said, we pass it when we make our way to and from the cabin. I take her photograph with my 'phone, not remembering at first the impermanence of things here. I could write a million words to you, Lewis, from this place, and they would melt as soon as I looked away from them, just as this picture will melt, its reality sinking back into the pool of infinite possibility.

You cannot spy on me in here.

I watch as the Reverend Becky Rayworth kneels before a memorial stone. "Look," she says. "This one's got my name on it." She traces her fingers over the inscription. "See: Rebecca Rayworth,

eight years old 1911 to 1919. Is that significant, do you think?"

"Flu epidemic probably. It killed nearly as many as were lost in the trenches."

She shivers. "Creepy, seeing your name on a gravestone, isn't it?" She gives a wry smile. "The funny thing is there'll be no one to mark our passing, will there? Nothing much left of us to speak of, anyway? We'll just be,... lost."

"Most likely."

"What should we expect, do you think? I mean in practical terms. Physically."

"I'm hoping if we're near enough to the impact zone, then nothing. We won't know anything."

"And if we're not quite near enough?"

"I really don't know, Rebecca. A massive shock-wave, maybe some volcanic effects as the asteroid breaches the earth's crust, pyroclastic flows of superheated gas - that sort of thing. We'd have to expect unconsciousness, and incineration - unconsciousness first, I hope."

She nods, taking it in with a grim acceptance. "If we can get a time of impact,... maybe we could take some pills. Not enough to kill us - just to sleep. What do you think?"

"I think I'd like to see it coming. Bear witness as it streaks across the sky."

"See it in, you mean? Okay."

To drift painlessly and effortlessly out of oneself into the dreaming is one thing but to be torn from life with fingernails dangling is quite another, and I wonder again about Rebecca's suggestion of pills - not that we have any, or at least not to the best of my memory. There are herbs, I suppose. I do have a rudimentary knowledge of the main killers, if only so I can be wary of them, but none of them will make for a painless exit - indeed quite the opposite. The most painless would be the hemlock drunk by Socrates. If the account by Plato can be taken literally, it allowed a gentle exit with only a creeping, painless peripheral neuropathy. But there are hemlocks and hemlocks, and ways of preparing them. The ancients were experts at this sort of thing. We no longer have the skills.

The fells are russet and green now, hung with great cloaks of a slow-moving mist. The valley is silent - no cars. There are a few low cottages dotted among the distant yews, but no smoke from their

chimneys. No one at home. They have either fled the vale, or are waiting in the church for us. Ravens croak and circle the ancient trees, black-flapping, while sheep call plaintively to one another across the fells.

We embrace spontaneously, both of us I think for the first time seriously contemplating what it might be like to die.

"Remind me," she says. "What are we doing here?"

"You wanted to come, remember?"

"I suppose I did."

"Well, here's the church, Rebecca. Your territory. I gave up on Anglicanism a long time ago."

"Don't be so elitist."

"Me?"

"Yes,... *you*." Her eyes sparkle as she teases. "Shaman. Heathen!"

"Well, it works for me."

"I know it does. But not everyone wants to dig for it, Tim. They don't all want to search for that hidden door and the comfort that comes with experiential knowing. They want a simpler path. A quiet understanding and a faith in *something*. And they want someone who can tell them stories about it. And they don't care if the story is to be read at a metaphorical level or taken literally, so long as the story is *beautiful*."

"Ah, well, that would be you then, so when you tell people stuff they'll look at you and believe in it. So when you scatter the earth over their dead, and speak of resurrection, they'll be comforted by it. You are a Priestess, after all. And an impressive one."

"I am? But I'm also a teacher."

"And a dancer."

"So many things,...and all of them in love with you."

In love with me? The words release a rush of emotion but I choose to hide from it, to divert the predictable response, that I love her too, and not because I don't because indeed I suspect by now that I do, but because I'm not sure if she's ready to hear it, and even if being in possession of a loving man is the best thing for a priestess.

"That's no way for a vicar to be talking. And you're dreaming remember? None of this is reliable."

"I'm dreaming? Yes,... I'd forgotten for a moment."

I direct her to the door of the church.

She follows meekly.

The dour slate exterior does little to prepare us for the colour of the interior. Light slants in through stained glass, and there are daffodils everywhere. And more,... there are people sat in the Sunday best of decades gone. There are little girls in pressed frocks and boys in white collars. I gasp as I remember an Easter Sunday of my boyhood. They turn as one at our coming in, stopping us in our tracks. I note there's no one in the pulpit, note also Rebecca's blank expression.

"Well, it's not me they're waiting for," I tell her, then press her forward, taking for myself a discrete position in the wings.

How had I known this was coming?

Am I creating this?

Are these only my expectations?

"What shall I do?" she asks, subliminally, for she's beyond casual earshot now.

"As your father would have done," I make back. "Sing All Things Bright and Beautiful, and keep the sermon short."

"That's a harvest hymn, you idiot!"

All right, so it's Easter: daffodils, death and resurrection.

Of course.

What could be more appropriate? Orcus, a pagan god has come to obliterate our world. It matters nothing, perhaps, this end of times, when already there has been so much time. There is time enough then to reinvent myself, either in the infinite possibilities of the dreaming, or at any point in the centuries past of a waking reality. Whatever happens, I realise with the kind of knowing that only comes from dreams that I'll be all right. It troubles me though, the idea of the loss of my self, at least as I perceive him to be now, that in a future time I may not have the sense of continuity my present memories grant. But why should this bother me when I reinvent myself all the time? My memory is not what it was, and the dreaming has a way of convincing me that whatever I wake up to, in the dreaming, is the current truth of me. Still, I would not want to forget Rebecca. I feel a twist of alarm at the thought of it. She is a serious attachment, but as the rite of Rebecca's creed reminds us, we can take nothing out of this world, just as we bring nothing in.

She reads from Paul, her voice low and sonorous, a tingle of reverberation in it as it comes down to me from the vaulted ceiling of the church, echoes around the pillars and raises sympathetic

whispers from the organ pipes. I listen intently, intrigued by this side of her. There is no communion cup, no bread on the altar, so I am not to bear witness then to Rebecca presiding over the blood and the body of Christ.

But something else.

I wonder about testing the veracity of the souls here, by asking the dream to make gone all thought forms, but I hold back, for fear of clearing the church. And Rebecca would know at once the culprit. I feel the dream thinning. I'm waking. Shall I try to hold on, or do I let go of this? Do I leave her be in this place where I tell myself I no longer belong? I spread my fingers before me, make ready to focus on the backs of my hands, to pull myself more securely in, but then I change my mind, ball my hands into cowardly fists, and I surface gently back to my more ordinary waking reality.

Gone.

It's small hours late, New Moon dark, and we are curled together, snug beneath the duvet.

"Don't go," she mumbles.

"I'm still here. You finish it. I'll be waiting for you in the morning, with coffee."

This exit from the dream leaves me troubled. It had begun so carefree, but progressed by imperceptible degrees to a subliminal discord, born of my growing attachment to Rebecca, and Rebecca's attachment to her own life, as opposed to giving selflessly in the service of God. It has revealed, as dreams often do, an uncomfortable truth: that we have been lonely on our own, and how these past days I have felt blessed to find a woman I can carry to my mountain, and against whose bosom I can lay my head at night.

But she is not mine, this priestess. Like the dancer in her too, she does not serve herself, but separates herself out that she might serve others. The priestess dons the vestments of divinity, like the dancer dons her shoes, not as a fashion statement, but as a requirement of office, and of her ultimate belonging to God, to *meaning*,... not to me.

I remember the audience at the Palladium, ecstatic at her dance; it was a dream, I know, but meaningful all the same. It meant to show me I am wrong in thinking we can have exclusive rights to anyone or anything. And attachment is a prerequisite for suffering,

for we are only fearful when we have something we do not want to lose. Our greatest fears are the loss of love, and life. Right now, most are pondering the loss of their own lives, while I am pondering the loss of a love I have dreamed of all my life, yet only just found as that life is about to end.

The irony is scalding. Either that or it means something.

Chapter 40

A hot morning; mist rises from the olive blanket of pines that descend the fell, and there is a seemingly solid plane of mistiness stretching from the rear deck, out to the horizon. Felltops dot the plane like an archipelago, and the sun paints it all in shades of amber and vanilla.

We are sitting looking out at it, the radio between us but neither wanting to switch it on and thereby spoil the otherwise untouched natural beauty of the scene. As the vapours rise and hold us in mesmerised silence, I am troubled by that bad-dream uneasiness. It threatens to colour my day. Rebecca too is labouring under it, and cuts quick to the core.

"You couldn't be married to a vicar, could you?" she says.

"Eh?"

"You heard."

"Is that a proposal, Ms. Rayworth?"

But my clumsy humour cannot lift this heaviness. "You know what I mean," she says. "Last night, in the dream,... there was a distance between us as soon as I walked into that church and did my,... my Vicar thing."

"I couldn't help it, I was waking up,... and remember we shouldn't talk about these things. It's just too confusing."

"Don't, Tim. It's too late for that. We're living in both worlds equally now. And Emma's wrong, you *can't* keep them separate or there's no point to either, not if we're going to take things seriously. We must look upon this as a gift, as a path to greater understanding, a greater truth. We have to talk about it, blend the impressions we take from both worlds. We're not children. I think we're emotionally secure enough to handle it." She touches her fingers to her throat as if to feel for the collar, which of course is no longer there. "I'm right, aren't I? It freaks you out, being with a vicar. You weren't sure about it before, but seeing me deliver a sermon last night put me squarely on the side of something you rejected a long time ago. Does even the word ‘God’ make you feel uncomfortable?"

"Maybe."

She thinks for a moment, gathering her words. "I understand. Let me guess: you were made to go to church by your parents, because

you attended a church school and it was therefore expected, but it bored you to tears. Nothing strange there - it accounts for a large proportion of the Anglican Communion. And you're not that bad because at least you felt there was more than could be got across in those bum achingly boring sermons. It's just that the vicar in the crinkly cassock wasn't getting at it for you, was he? He wasn't explaining anything. He wasn't revealing any truths, and you'd seen through him. He was just some silly old guy in a frock, with badly fitting dentures."

At last, a flicker of lightness. Her description pricks my memory and releases images not dissimilar to the ones she describes. "How did you know?"

"You went to Middleton Parish? The guy in the crinkly cassock and the badly fitting dentures was probably my dad."

"Not if he was there before 1971. And after that I'd stopped going altogether. That was the Reverend Marsh's day. I heard he'd left under a bit of a cloud. Your father must have replaced him."

"Well, all right. Maybe it wasn't my dad, but you homespun mystics are all the same. The traditional church doesn't do it for you any more, and there's something embarrassingly earnest about all those more modern *serious* Christians singing songs and clapping their hands, and where the vicars either dress like ageing hippies or bank managers. So, you jump ship, and find yourself any leaky old tub that helps you make way. You're not alone in this, Tim. There are many like you. Some sink without a trace, some come back to the church in later life, once they've got the dope out of their system and they can start thinking in non-literal terms. Others do indeed make way, like you. And I respect that. I have no problem with it, so why do you have a problem with me?"

"I don't have a problem. Really I don't."

"You didn't until last night, when you saw me talking serious shop, in the plain language of a Christian woman. And before you deny it, remember, we feel our way through the dreaming with a sixth sense. I can read what you're feeling, as much as you can read me."

"And what did you read?"

"Distance." She marks the gap between us - a few feet of decking. "I'd try to close up that gap except I'm afraid of falling down the yawing chasm between us at the moment."

"All right,... there was something, yes, but not what you think.

Mine's a solitary path. I don't look to save souls unless they've come to me bleeding and lost. It may not be the Christian way, but I can't help that. It's the road I've been called to travel. And if they press me about the deep and meaningful stuff, I shrug my shoulders and say I don't know and tell them to go and speak to a proper priest. I haven't the conviction to read the Bible like you, as if I understood every word, and like I mean it. There are no words to describe what makes sense to me. And I'm just trying to save myself. You're a proper priestess. Your job is to save everybody. I'm just a selfish fraud."

She gives a sigh, then slides up the gap so our thighs touch. A good sign, I'm thinking, and take comfort from it. "You chose a solitary path because you're a solitary man, Tim. I think that's why I like you. You don't need me to save you. There's no weight to you. You bob along beside me very well. But you underestimate yourself. People do look to you. I do. Raul does. Yes, you lack the conviction of your ideas. So do I, but that's no bad thing because there's nothing worse than a priest who's too shrill. And you're not a fraud. You're the real thing. As for reading the Bible, you think I understand every word? Don't be silly. Sure, I can always carry an audience, because I'm a showgirl. It doesn't mean I'm any more sure of myself than you."

"No,... that stuff about the psychological interpretation of parables, that's important. That's an insight I was never granted. That's why they never made sense to me. You know important things, Rebecca, and you can explain them."

"You know important things too, Tim. This way into the dreaming, into the psychical substratum of life itself,... you can't be underestimating that, surely? But I understand, you lack confidence, lack faith sometimes. So do I. But another thing my father taught me was when faith is lacking, either yours or theirs, just look them in the eye and speak with conviction, then you'll always carry the day. It doesn't make you right. But sometimes even when we don't feel any connection with the divine, we have to pretend we do for the sake of others. A priest might be clenching his buttocks because of a dodgy meal the night before, but he can't run out on the funeral service. He has to keep a sober face and perform the rite like he's not about to drop his guts."

"That's why I was always wary of the priesthood."

"I know,... me too." She places her hand over mine. "All I'm

saying is we can learn from each other. You healed my peg-leg. My own faith couldn't help there - maybe because I didn't believe in it enough. But I believe in you."

I feel a shudder as something ecstatic passes head to toe. It's good she feels that way, good knowing it makes me feel this way. But we must beware of Ego, Lewis.

"Still friends then?" I ask.

She laughs: "Idiot."

I take that as a yes.

The morning matures, and the mist burns away to reveal the undulating green fells rolling off to a blue sky horizon. Their summits are pricked with little man-made cairns, visible even at a great distance and which draw the eye - also the thready paths that lead up to them. I run a pair of binoculars across them and discover no signs of life, other than the grey sheep feeding in scattered nonchalance. There are no people on the trails, though by this time of day, in peak season, there is nearly always someone about. It feels wrong. It feels eerie. The world has changed so quickly, and I do not need the BBC to tell me so.

I find straw hats so we can continue sitting out on the deck without the sun on our heads. We read a little, then play chess as the sun rises to the meridian. Rebecca sweats, little rivulets descending her chest into her bosom. For all our conciliatory talk this morning, there remains a trace of reserve between us, something as yet unresolved, something important.

It's true, I care nothing for saving the souls of others. I have rather an un-evangelical approach to matters of spirit, am comfortable remaining on the mountain, preparing my own exit from this world without worrying about anyone else. It's not an attractive facet of character, I know, and I shall probably pay for it. People think me cold, aloof; even Rebecca tells me my frown is enough to curdle milk and frighten horses, but really I have given up on thinking I can be any other way. In my private heaven, if I cannot have Rebecca for company, I would prefer to be alone, spinning for myself transient dream lovers as thought forms if I should feel the need. But Rebecca is different.

Rebecca's place is among people.

This is what I am still thinking.

Having helped rebirth this side of her, it seems wrong now to assume I can simply hold onto her for my own comfort. But the

world is such a messy place - chaotic, comprised entirely of irreconcilable differences, and infinite paradox. And that was before the asteroid. What it's like now, down there, is anyone's guess. Its pain is infinite and it will dissolve to nothingness all trace of anyone who would devote themselves to its welfare. I do not want that to happen to Rebecca.

The chess continues.

We're even - three games each so far. As in life, she's bold with her moves, striking deep into territory I had thought sacrosanct. I'm more defensive, only daring to make bold when I have built a solid foundation. Rebecca's boldness is sometimes her undoing, as is my defensiveness, for by the time I'm ready to move, the game has already advanced beyond my ability to catch up with it. And Rebecca sometimes overreaches herself.

"Draw?" she suggests.

I concede.

We make an odd couple for sure - the Shaman and the Vicar, but this is the path we're on, at least for now, and we have no choice in it, for like the shaman, once the priestess receives the call of spirit, she must respond or die.

"None of this is going to be easy for us," she says. "It doesn't reveal a smooth path, nor even where that path is leading. But it puts us on the same path, doesn't it? *The same path*."

"Yes,... yes it does."

It puts us on the same path, I'm thinking, *for now*. I cannot keep her on the mountain. I know she'll be called to venture beyond it, long before the asteroid hits.

Chapter 41

The news at noon headlines the economy, it speaks breathlessly of falling stock markets, and of pound dollar exchange rates. It is the economy that must be dealt with. It must be tidied up, tweaked by those gurus who know best how the beast works, the same gurus who thrashed it into near extinction by their avarice. There is no talk of the enormity of the actual cause, no mention of the fact that no matter how much tweaking is to be done, there is an underlying disconnect, a profound blindness at the root of it.

Something is coming, Lewis, and whatever the result, hit or miss, nothing is going to be the same again.

After the dull, impenetrable economy-speak, there is a curious attempt at resurrecting the story of the teacher who did not kidnap and murder the girl, but who downloaded pornography. This is becoming too weak, I'm afraid. The commentator explains how the material was streamed from a Web site in California, and the teacher now finds himself in breach of copyright, facing a fine or imprisonment. The pornographic emporium seeks to make an example of him on moral grounds. They will *have* him. Eternal scapegoat. Teacher. Preacher. Child molester. But he is me, and I pray he shall always be one step ahead of the bastards.

Meanwhile an old warhorse of a Parliamentarian is hauled before a committee of grandees, accused of touching a woman's bottom thirty years ago. There are also allegations that an aged celebrity fondled the breasts of an under-aged girl half a century ago. The time lapse makes no difference to the seriousness of these allegations of course, except if it were me, I'd surely be unable to remember so far back in order to adequately explain myself.

Harassment, Lewis. Abuse. Rape. Indecent. *Sexual*. Have you noticed the beat of the drum? It's a familiar rhythm, and how we leap to it. Indeed, there is a subliminal pummelling here that has me reeling, but under the circumstances, I'm afraid all this talk of transgressional sex is merely irritating because there are other stories I want to hear.

Finally, and almost in passing, we are told the traffic situation is beginning to ease, but there is still congestion around the major airports and the ferry terminals to the continent. Banking websites and ATMs are still off-line, but there is talk of a solution.

Experts say,...

"For heaven's sake! What about the fucking asteroid?"

Rebecca smiles. "You're not going to turn out to be one of those old men who shouts at the radio are you?"

“You’re forgetting, old age is one indignity we shall both be spared.”

“Touché.”

"All I want to know is how big it is, and where and when it's going to hit."

"Or *if*."

"Oh, it has to hit. Two weeks ago there was nothing else on my mind except how the hell I was going to keep going until retirement, how long before I could crawl safely back into the womb after a lifetime of bruising and disappointment. But now,... nothing else makes sense, Rebecca. *It has to hit*! Otherwise I just get buried again in all that,... all that...."

"Shit?" She smiles. "It does have a way of reordering one's priorities, doesn't it?"

We are by the tarn, wrapped in bathrobes after swimming. Rebecca holds the radio in her lap and occasionally cranks it to restore power. She tweaks the dial for something new, but the short wave is given over to nothing but the wow and squeal of static. No more voices can be teased out of it.

"They mentioned the cash-points," she says.

"But not if they'll be working any time soon."

She sighs. "What if we've got it wrong, Tim? What if things are mostly back to normal in the world. They did say the traffic was easing a bit. You know how these things come and go. Perhaps everyone's calmed down now."

"So,... what are you saying?"

"Perhaps we should go and look for ourselves."

Something deep inside of me recoils at the thought of leaving the cabin. Sure, I had predicted this moment, and not long ago, and did not expect it would come so soon. "You mean,... down *there*?

She laughs. "Just look at your face! Yes, down *there*."

It's no joke; this is really serious for me; she's touched a nerve. She senses it and reaches over to reassure me. "Tim?"

"I thought we were never going back. I thought we were going to stay here. We haven't the petrol. We don't know what it's like,..."

Her hand applies a gentle pressure to my wrist. "We don't have

to go if you don't want. I was only teasing."

No she wasn't. I know I've over-reacted here. And in truth, Lewis it's not just the thought of losing Rebecca back into the world though her calling. I'm also afraid of this sense of unreality dissolving and everything settling back the way it was before: no asteroid, no world on the brink of transformation. In the dream, I threw my wallet away, remember? And it felt good. I don't want the cash-points to be working again. Ever. Rebecca was right, I do not want burying again in all that *shit*. This coming asteroid has lifted me above all of that, allowed me time to think of things that are really important.

"I have this mad idea," I tell her.

"Oh?"

"That I'd like to turn over some more land here, make a bigger vegetable garden. Keep some chickens, plant fruit trees. I could be self sufficient in a couple of seasons."

Rebecca gives me a doubtful smile. "An agrarian community of one?"

"Well,... two,... I mean, if you'd like to join me."

She blushes. "A sweetly naive, Tolstoyan commune of two?"

"I know it's irrational." I'm gushing now, and I don't know where this nonsense is coming from, other than the fear in me. "I know I don't have the skills, and come winter this place is easily snowed in and you can't get a vehicle up the road."

She seems happy to humour me. "Well, we could always hibernate, like bears," she says.

"No place to bring up children either, no schools, no Internet, nothing like a normal life."

"I'm too old for babies, Tim, and you fire blanks remember? And to hell with the Internet. We can play chess and cards, read books, like in the old days. It wasn't so bad, as I recall. And I know that's not what you're saying,... but,... well, what are you saying, Tim?"

"That I'm a coward. That I can't change the way we live, but I hate it so much I want to hide from it. Up here. That jibe about crawling back into the womb; I've been wanting to do it all of my life!"

She touches her fingertips to my forehead. A curious gesture; I read a blessing in it, even if none was intended. "Crisis point," she says. "A fork in the path. Which way to choose, I wonder?"

"And which would you choose?"

"Asking me as a priestess?"

I'm nodding.

"Well, she says, "Our place is always in the world, until our natural mortality kicks us out of it, so we've got to hold on, Tim, and always be on the right path."

"But what is that path. Where is it leading?"

"Listen, our purpose in life is to evolve, psychologically. We do that by walking in the old heroic traces, by puzzling over them. But like you said, no matter what happens, live or die, we'll be all right."

"I said that?"

She nods, and in my mind's eye a fork in the path opens - the dream of my beautiful vicar; dappled sunlight on an old stone, planted in Victorian times. The stone marks divergent paths, and a choice. It marks the path to the way of light, climbing back to the higher land, a place where I fear the storms will entrap me, render me blind and wear me down. And it marks also the darker path, the path that leads deep into myself, where I fear to drown. I know where we're most likely heading with this and I feel a shiver - someone walking over my grave. "Maybe you're right. We should find out what's going on. Down there."

"We don't have to. I told you, I was teasing."

"No you weren't."

"I was. I *was.* Well,... mostly. I know what we said about seeing it out up here, but aren't you just a little bit curious? We could have a quick nosey, get a feel for it, then come back."

Actually, I couldn't care less; this is Rebecca's mission, but as she has taken to repeating, we're on the same path. I know this is true, if only because without her I feel empty and worthless, which means I must go where she goes.

"Let's try Penrith, then. It's the nearest town of any size - a big junction on the M6 and a mainline railway station. We'll keep to the back roads as much as we can. Shall we go in Rosy? She'll be more comfortable for sleeping in, if we need to. I mean if we get stuck."

"Penrith? We talked of Penrith in the dreaming, last night."

"Yes, we were with John Whittaker, remember? Maybe we should explore that link. Go visit the bookshop."

"Okay. I could do with some trash second-hand novels to while away the rainy afternoons up here."

And what does it matter? So long as I'm with her I've known all

along that I would take the path she chooses for me.

Will it be a return to an ordinary life, then? Or shall we embrace the depths, face down our fears and in doing so reveal a secret about our lives neither of us could have imagined possible?

Chapter 42

We have topped off Rosy's tank with fuel I've siphoned from the Volvo. I don't know if this is a good idea; if we were to lose Rosy now - have her taken from us by brigands, perhaps - the Volvo is of no use to us. But I've no idea how long we'll be away, and we might need the range if the road is to be sticky with traffic.

Anyway,

Rebecca has asked me to drive, lacking confidence, she says, on the downhill run from the cabin. I find it hard to believe Rebecca lacks confidence in anything, and suspect only a hidden purpose like how trustworthy I am to be considered when handling her precious things. And Rosy does seem precious to her.

It is a test then.

I take it slow, respectful. Rosy has a harder, more metallic feel to her than I imagined and than I remember from the dreaming. Her brakes are also alarmingly poor, and they grind ominously as we descend. From the outside she looks robust and confident, but on closer acquaintance, requires caution. A bit like Rebecca.

She wears a dark blouse and trousers under a stoutly made waxed jacket that once belonged to Miranda. I have also fashioned for her a clerical collar from a strip of thin, shiny white plastic, which I have taped together at the back. It won't fool a clergyman, but I remember the dream and our conversation about people thinking twice before abusing one of God's representatives. I have persuaded her it's a sensible precaution against the big tattooed bruisers we might encounter. She looks the part now, and I know she can live it very well if she needs to.

No, Lewis this is not an abuse of the office. She is licensed to preach, to wear the vestments. She only doubts that she is worthy. No harm then in drawing upon it for protection when there are so many who wear the vestments of the priesthood, yet abuse them all the time.

As we begin our journey, she fingers the collar thoughtfully. "It definitely freaks you out, doesn't it?"

I've been here before, I think. "I'm getting used to it," I tell her, but I don't know if this is true.

On the back roads, we meet with no traffic. This is not unusual, even in peak season, but coming down to Ullswater we have

another of those inklings that things are very different now - no boats plying the lake, and no vehicles at all on the normally busy lake road, no motorcycles twitching and itching for a squeeze past. By now we've left the sunshine behind and the clouds thicken, finally bursting with a steely rain that paints the world of a sudden black and shiny.

We leave the lake, turning up just before Pooley. All is forlorn in the wet. There follows a long, meandering road - all hedgerows and meadows with mist capped fells drawn back into a blurred, rain softened distance. I have the peculiar sense of their abandoning us - the fells I mean - for who will endow them with romance and mystery when we are gone?

They turn their backs, contemplate their fate alone. It seems odd to me, that the universe would seek to awaken to itself through us in order to see and feel the beauty of its creations, and then be so careless as to have its eyes put out by a randomly hurled rock. But then the former is spiritual thinking, the latter more prosaic. It is the usual paradox: the Romantic poet pens his vision of mystical ecstasy while slowly starving to death for fundamental want of food. And of course the materialists mock him.

Just as we're thinking we are the last man and woman alive, we come upon the tail end of a traffic jam - a family saloon complete with rear slung bicycles and bulging roof box. We are still a mile from the junction with the A66, a mile further to the M6, and Penrith on the other side of that. A big man is leaning on the driver's door, puffing on a vapouriser. He seems not to have noticed that he is soaking wet, and I gather from his despondent demeanour, the traffic hasn't moved in a very long time.

"All of last night and most of today," he tells us.

His wife is dozing in the passenger seat. There are pale children in the rear. They have moon faces - bored into silence and lethargy.

"They said on the radio the traffic was easing."

"Well, not here it isn't," he replies, and then: "Have you any water?"

"For the car?"

"No, to drink. There were rumours they might be passing water down the line, but that was this morning and we've had nothing." He looks indignant, as if he feels let down by “Authority”.

Rebecca fills their water bottles from Rosy's tank.

Authority. I suppose that means you, Lewis. I'm sure you're fully

cognisant of this man's plight; if you're not I'm guilty of seriously overestimating your abilities. So, who shall help us now? Will it be the usual army of retired old ladies, mothers of the nation and, when all else has failed, its usual cost-free fall-back: the WRVS?

"Have you far to go?" asks Rebecca.

The guy is nervous with her. He eyes the collar, but discretely as a gentleman eyes a woman's decolletage - briefly, and then with averted vision. Perhaps he's afraid she will offer to pray for him, afraid he might be in need of it.

"Newcastle," he says. And if he could only get across the Motorway at Penrith, he would be home and dry, he assures us. "There'll be a clear run all the way back up the 66. It's just North Lakes that's always busy, innit?"

I suppose it is, but I've never seen it backed up like this, not even at the closing of a bank-holiday weekend. Other people appear as we converse around Rosy's open side-door. They enquire after a toilet, but alas, Rosy does not carry one. I realise there is a smell of excrement coming from the hedgerows. Rebecca hasn't noticed it yet, but her nose is not as sensitive as mine - too much wine perhaps. The people look untidy, faces lined with anxiety and an understandable weariness. They too ask for water. All we can do is pump Rosy's tank for them until it's dry.

We become the temporary focus for an exchange of hearsay. The 66 is choked with traffic in the run-up to its crossing of the M6. The M6 is stationary, both north and southbound. Some people have walked that far and brought back news of the impasse. We have heard this before of course. Whittaker told us of it when we met in the dreaming. The queue for joining the motorway was longer yesterday, but some people have turned around, thinking to back-track and find their way south via the old A6. There are also rumours it will clear before evening.

What would my advice be?

How should I know?

I hesitate to respond, but Rebecca nails me with her eyes and communicates subliminally, but forcefully all the same.

At times like these people don't need certainty, she's saying; they need ideas on which to fasten hope. If the M6 is stationary, there seems little point in trying to join it. I point out that the A6 runs through several towns, and may be gridlocked at any one of them, but it's worth a try, plus there are houses in those towns where they

might stop for water. In a land as wet as ours, it seems we have taken its necessity for granted. My thoughts are met with mixed feelings. Some are determined to wait things out, to trust in authority to deliver them from evil. Others decide upon the back roads and plot a course on their 'Droids.

It's mid afternoon, now, and I'm thinking we should return to the cabin, perhaps explore the roads south tomorrow, or venture once more into the little Lakeland towns, where surely there is not this surfeit of humanity in flight. I'm also inexplicably thirsty, now we have pumped the last of our water, and I'm trying not to think of it.

"Can we walk into Penrith from here?" asks Rebecca.

We can, of course. It's just a few miles, but I don't want to leave Rosy by the side of the road. "There was a farm a little way back. It was advertising a campsite. Perhaps we can pitch up there. There's a decent network of footpaths between here and Penrith."

I have the Ordnance Survey on the 'Droid, and you know as well as I the paths I'm talking about, Lewis. As I flick across the screen, the GPS system locks on, pinpoints me for your convenience. For myself I can manage perfectly well without its reassurance - being brought up in an era when we were still taught which way up to hold a paper map. Meanwhile, the mobile coverage shows a rather anaemic few bars. Texts catch up with me. There's nothing from Raul, but if I want to claim my free minutes for next month I am told to "click here".

There seems little point.

Instead, I back up my narrative to the cloud while I have the chance, then squeeze off a quick massage to my friend:

Situation in UK downplayed. Roads still impassable around Lakes. No movement. Fear violence by weekend in cities. Suggest stay Durban. Me and Becca at cabin. Both okay.

"That should keep them happy," says Rebecca. "*Me and Becca at cabin,* indeed!"

I manage to three point Rosy and begin driving back the way we came. A few other vehicles tag along, perhaps thinking we know the way home. If they really knew where Rebecca and I were bound, they'd not be following so close. Indeed, Lewis, if Rebecca and I knew where we were eventually bound that afternoon, we might have turned around ourselves.

"You remember that night, at Raul's?" I ask.

"How can I forget it?"

"Did you ever pose nude for him?"

"What? Did he say I did?"

"No, but he told me he'd like to paint you, and we both know what that means."

"Well, if we get out of this alive, Tim, you can tell him I shall pose in all my glory for him - butchered leg and all - but only on the understanding the painting shall replace that languid monstrosity he did of an improbably pouting Amelia Grey."

"Be careful what you wish for - and anyway, like I keep telling you your leg's okay. As for the rest of you, you're remarkably well kept for, I mean for a woman for your age."

I take the hit on my arm, and we laugh.

It seems inappropriate to you, the jocular ease with which we slip through a world in free-fall, but I am happy to report it is human nature to hold on to any semblance of normality. This means we must shut out all memory of the looks on those childrens' faces. We must dismiss them, while at the same time wishing the family safe in their own beds before nightfall, as unlikely as this seems to us under the circumstances. But we *imagine* it so, and so all is well.

What else can we do?

To embrace all the suffering in the world is to be consumed by it. We must be selective in our choices when looking to share our compassion. Unless we are priests, and then we have no choice.

Ah, here were are.

We have come upon the entrance to the farm. Homely camping vacancies are advertised, and I am heartened by this - wondering if our problems in fact boil down to nothing more than a traffic jam, that it will clear eventually, just like the rumours say, that indeed, Lewis, I am making much more of this than is necessary. I slow down to make the turn. Our followers are confused at first, then swing wide and accelerate past, as if they knew all along where they were going. I'm watching them in the mirror, not paying much heed to my forward motion, wondering instead about their lives and if, like all the others we have met today, they'll continue be well.

Rebecca digs her nails into my arm and yells: "STOP!"

A muck splattered Landrover has speeded up the muddy track as if to ram us. It stops short and blocks the way. Rosy slithers to a

halt in surprise. There are two green jacketed men. One stays in the vehicle, the other emerges. He carries a gun, at which I stare in disbelief. This is England, Lewis. Such things are obscene to us away from the battlefield or the grouse moor, however, for the gun-minded I shall describe it: it's of an under and over design, a pump action thing, and expensively detailed. In short, it is the skeet-blasting accoutrement of a very wealthy man. I wind the window down to speak with him, but he tells me, without being asked, that the site is closed to visitors.

"We just wondered if we could park here while we walk into Penrith."

But the farm is closed and the gun is now across the man's chest as if to repel boarders. Rebecca leans across and smiles at him. "Any chance we could just fill up our water tank while we're here, then be on our way? I presume you have a tap?"

He's taken aback by the collar, as we are discovering many people are. But alas he is no friend of God, nor the clergy, and tips his head to a stagnant pond, scummy with chemical run-off from the fields. I think he means to be both obstructive and offensive.

She wrinkles her nose in disgust. "Ooh, we'll not bother thanks," and then, pointedly: "Come along, Timothy, we're trespassing. Whatever were we thinking?"

Rosy reverses clumsily, slithering this way and that, but finally gains traction on the tarmac again, and we continue a safe distance from the man with the gun. Rebecca is shaking, so I press her hand for comfort. She smiles unconvincingly.

"Shit, Tim. I wasn’t expecting that!"

"I know a place," I tell her. "It's not far. Just off the main road. A public footpath, a stream of clear water. We can fill her up there. It's also a good place to start our walk." I imagine I sound bright, confident, but we both know, Lewis, I am fooling myself. In the world that is coming, it will be the men with guns who wield the power, while the rest of us must empty our pockets of possessions for them. The asteroid might have struck a thousand years ago, or another thousand years from now and still found us so ill prepared in our primitive natures.

"Okay, here we are."

We are out of the familiar centre of the Lakes, on the fringes of the National Park, or such places would be better known. They would be signposted, replete with picnic benches and waste bins

and little bags of dog turds. But there is only a muddy track, leading down to a pull-in, and room for a single vehicle. There's a clutch of trees and crags for concealment from the road, and there's a view over the Eamont, where a footbridge over black rippling waters will set us on our way. It's an idyllic picnic spot, a place to bring the children I might, in another life, have had.

Ground zero.

Penrith.

What all this about another life, Timothy?

And what the hell are we doing here? We should be fighting our way on board a ferry, then driving all the way to China!

Calm down. There's no sense in such thoughts, now.

Rebecca looks at my father's watch. It's going up for four. There is ample daylight to make the trip, and return before there is danger of trolls. We fill Rosy's water-tank from a clear stream that dances down the fell, and we fill a water-bottle each, drop it into the cavernous pockets of our jackets. We take also a handful of vegetables - carrots and potatoes from the cool box in the van. I have one of those survivalist fire starters - a small flint and striker, which I demonstrate to Rebecca, causing her to leap backwards at the shower of sparks that issues from it. I'm thinking we can roast the vegetables on sapling skewers for a meal if we need to, and if we can get a fire going - long time since I was a boy-scout though, Lewis.

I have a paper map, much frayed and split along the creases. I bought it in olden times for the summers when I would come here to walk. Rebecca calls it quaint, but it needs no batteries, guides us just as well as GPS. It also saves my 'phone battery for emergencies, though who I could call upon for help now, I have no idea. Rebecca has brought her stick, and limps a little as we make way, but does not seem to be slowed down by it.

"How's the leg?" I ask.

"Okay. Walking on it, aren't I?"

"Yes."

"Then why ask? Think I can't make it?"

I like her pugnacious ways, and sometimes she can be very spiky indeed, but she does not fool me; this woman has nerves of steel, but a gentle spirit, and above all, she's on my side. "On the contrary, I think you're capable of anything you set your mind to, Reverend."

She touches the collar, keeps forgetting it's there. "Well, of

course I am. I mean,... I hooked you, didn't I?"

"Don't flatter yourself. I was desperate, and therefore easy."

"That's not what they say in the staff-room."

"Oh? And what do they say? Apart from how badly I treated my wife."

"That you are a queer fish, Mr. Magowan. A hater of company, both male and female and desperate for neither."

"This is true."

"Yes it is. They also say you have a dark contempt for the stupidity of adults, a low threshold for bullshit, and a slightly scary demeanour - which you do by the way - but I see through you. The children see though it too and enjoy being with you, in spite of all your grumbling. I hear them talking about you in my classes."

"Well,... I'm glad I have some redeeming qualities. And I do prefer the blistering honesty of children to the duplicity of the adult world."

"Ah, yes. Thank God for the blistering honesty of children, Mr. Magowan."

We hear the thudding of a helicopter. It flies low along the valley, heading north. I have the binoculars in my jacket pocket. I pull them out and focus while leaning surreptitiously and spy-like, against a tree.

Police.

They are flying the length of the M6, assessing the situation. Are your traffic cameras not working, Lewis? Are you blind now, that you must send up these tin whirlybirds? What about your satellites?

Are you still listening to me?

We reach the motorway along a network of paths, and without having to approach the farms. I am relieved by this, conscious that while the news bulletins prattle on about the economy, and sexual perversion, the bottom has fallen from the world so the landless struggle for clean water and toilets, while the landed repel us with elaborately decorated arms.

The M6 stretches North and South, an unnatural barrier that separates us from the town. Normally of course it presents a snarling river of metal in motion, but this afternoon it is eerily becalmed. Indeed, when we come upon it, it reminds me of a car-park at a rock concert. South it runs a few hundred miles, to the Midlands, North not far to the border, then the A74 into Scotland. Hundreds of miles again. It cannot be as solid as this all the way,

but I cannot see the end of it in either direction, and imagine it thus.

Stagnation.

The wheels of the world jammed tight.

Going nowhere.

Those who had been on camping trips have set up their tents on the grass verges, suggesting there's been no movement here in days. The rest sit in their cars, faces drawn down into greyness by the long hours. I detect the odour of improvised latrines once more.

We stare at it in astonishment.

"So many," says Rebecca. "How many do you think?"

"I don't know. Thousands, at least that we can see. But we've no idea how far it stretches."

She pulls a potato from her pocket and turns it thoughtfully. "It wouldn't work, would it?"

"What wouldn't work?"

"Small agrarian communities, like we were joking about. Growing their own vegetables. Rearing a few chickens on the side. Living life in tune with nature and mindful of a spiritual dimension. Maybe it would have worked in the dark ages, or in Roman times. Do you know the population of Roman Britain - the whole of it mind - was just a few million?"

"Really?"

"Now we're what? Sixty five million? We can't turn the clock back, Tim. For this many to live we need the world pretty much as it is: slick and fast; the whole mad pullulating machine. The slightest spanner in the works and you have people going hungry, people asking strangers for water. It's unthinkable it can ever be any different to the way it is."

"You mean the way it was."

You see, Lewis, from where I'm standing now, I think the best we can aim for in the short term is the comfort of our own beds and the familiarly of those people we know around us. And in the long term? The fact there is no long term, my friend, is the only thing that makes any of this even bearable.

Our way leads up and across a narrow concrete footway, suspended high over these six stagnant lanes. People watch us, perhaps for the novelty of it. A woman waves at us from below as we climb. Rebecca waves back, then realises it is not a greeting, but a warning. The bridge is forbidden, guarded by a troll. Half way

across we are presented with the barrier of the biggest fluorescent jacket I have ever seen. Surely, it will fit ten men! And above it rides the busted nose of a boxer while the eyes are hidden below a peaked cap pulled securely down. No tattooed bruiser this, however.

This, Lewis, is the Law.

"Haven't you been told to stay with your vehicle, *sir*?"

The voice is flat, monotone, unemotional. Thumbs are tucked into a belt, replete with handcuffs, mace-spray and zapper gun. And the "sir" is the policeman's sir, with a razor blade in it.

"Em,... no."

Confidence Timothy! When confidence is most lacking, it is then one must speak with the greatest conviction, remember? "We're not with a vehicle. We've walked up from the valley. We have friends in town. They've asked us to visit."

It's true. I have John Whittaker's standing invitation, and realise with some surprise I am not actually lying about having friends here, nor having been invited. But they have sealed off the town and are trying to prevent a "public order situation", with thousands of stranded travellers swelling the streets in search of bed and board, or trying to get on a train. It's sensible, I suppose. What else can one do? But how will they feed and water all those souls down there, stranded on the motorway? Surely that voluntary army of elderly ladies will be hard stretched.

And why is none of this reported? Judging from the last bulletin, we might be forgiven for thinking things were getting back to normal. Perhaps our situation here in the North is unique, that there is beer and skittles elsewhere.

The copper's expression does not change. He would be a devil of a poker player. But he *is* thinking. And he's thinking we are wax jacketed. Rebecca also wears green Wellingtons, and a *clerical* collar. I wear a tweed cap. We are not your usual motoring travellers, and we do not look like we're of the Kagool-wearing tourist fraternity either. We are possibly *local*. We are possibly *Parish.* We are possibly *connected.* He pulls out a notebook and flicks patiently to a clean page.

"Names?"

"Em, John and em,..." But what is John's father's name? It escapes me. Is it not also John? But that's just too confusing,... one might easily mistake the one for the other. And why have I not

thought of this anomaly before?

Rebecca, catches my arm. "I think the officer means *our* names, Timothy."

"Oh. Sorry. Stupid of me."

He writes our names on the pad. I give him our address at the cabin because it sounds local, then regret it because I am not comfortable with this information in his notebook. He writes it out again on another sheet which he tears out and hands to Rebecca, she being considered the more reliable, I presume on account of her office. The paper also bears his commission number.

"There'll be other check-points," he warns, us. "Can't promise they'll let you through, but you can show them that and ask."

"Thanks."

But he's no longer listening and is speaking instead into his collar. Rebecca tells me later she resisted the urge to confer upon him God's blessing in gratitude, in case he considered it a form of bribery and we should thereby have forfeited our safe passage. She folds our makeshift ticket carefully, slips it into her hand-warmer pocket, and we proceed blithely into town.

That we have successfully outwitted a civil lock-down buoys our spirits.

Small things are important now.

And spirit is everything.

As I said Lewis, you are not that many, and in a situation such as this, even with the army behind you, you are stretched uselessly thin, reliant on the nod and the integrity of a few scattered human beings in uniform. We hear the helicopter circling the town, but it's lost in a cap of steely cloud, and we see no other policemen. There is an unmanned and rather loose barrier of bollards on the main approach, a sign that says "Road Closed", but we proceed with impudence, and not a little authority, by virtue of our piece of paper.

Technology is useless at times like this, Lewis. It makes you too remote. What you need are feet on the ground, and hands to help. Your aloofness only breeds suspicion.

It has begun to rain again and this may explain the empty streets. We tug up our hoods and try to look like we know what we're about, but the only purposeful direction in Penrith for me is the route to Whittaker’s bookshop. We find it closed. There's a group of youths on the street corner. They watch us as if we are the

only things in motion they have seen all day. But this is Penrith, not Chicago, so, notwithstanding the approach of our heavenly nemesis, I persuade myself I'm being unrealistic in my fear of murder.

I knock, without much hope. We have gone through the motions, and though it seems almost fated that we are here now, I do not expect an answer. But a light comes on, and after a moment the door opens. John Whittaker, senior, eyes us with surprise - even a touch of delight.

I think we are welcome.

I joke with him. "Closing a little early today, Mr Whittaker?"

He extends his hand, his face lit now with a genuine pleasure. "Mr. Magowan? What a lovely surprise, sir. Do, please come in."

"It's purely a social call," I assure him. "We're not looking for books."

He glances at his watch.

"Is it a bad time, Mr. Whittaker?"

"No, no,... I'm just wondering about you getting away again. There's a curfew, you know?"

"Really? That *is* news. The copper on the bridge didn't mention that."

"Word came round by loud hailer this morning. It starts at nightfall."

"And the punishment for transgression?"

He gives a wry smile. "They didn't say."

Rebecca's eyes are wide. "A curfew?"

"Yes,... extraordinary, isn't it?"

Whittaker, senior, is ninety years old, moves well for his age, but cannot disguise his years. His experience of life includes the Second World war. He can speak of Dunkirk, Normandy, the Ardennes and the relief of Belsen, but never has. Instead he speaks of the lake poets, and John Ruskin.

"I was preparing a fish for dinner," he tells us. "Rather a large one actually."

"The one you caught in the dreaming, no doubt."

He does not hear me and I feel Rebecca's elbow in my ribs.

He shows us through to the back of the shop, to a little kitchenette where a large trout lies upon the counter. "Caught it this morning," he says, with a swell of pride. "Would you care to join me?"

"Are you allowed to take your catch home, Mr. Whittaker? I

mean, I thought,..."

He looks abashed. "Oh,... quite. Totally frowned upon,... but under the circumstances, well,... who cares?"

"What you need, Mr. Whittaker," says Rebecca, as she slips out of her jacket, "Are some nice fresh vegetables to go with that. It just so happens we brought some with us."

Rebecca sets to with a sharp knife, filleting the fish while I look on. Whittaker takes another knife to the potatoes and carrots. I feel I should be doing something to help, but there's too little room in the kitchenette, so I slip into the study where last I spoke with Whittaker the younger, about dreams and dead wives and things. I feel a bone weariness of a sudden, and lower myself into an easy chair. The walk, on top of more sex than I can remember in my life these past days, has left me sleepy. I hear Rebecca laughing in response to a joke. There was always a gentle humour about old Whittaker, I recall.

And something wise.

I'm glad he and Rebecca have hit it off.

I cast my eye about the room. This is where the treasures of the bookshop were once brought for a more leisurely perusal. We have Wordsworth and Coleridge within arms reach: Lyrical Ballads, 1807; black, cloth bound, spine cracked, and I shudder to think what that book might be worth in times other than this. We also have Emerson and Whitman,... the American transcendentalists. Then there are yellow stained Penguin reading copies of Plato, and poems by the pre-Socratics; murmurings from the dawn of the Ideal. Whittaker, the fellow mystic: it would not surprise me if in the basement I should find an alembic, glowing with the gold of revelation.

We had the right idea, I think, Lewis. I'm speaking of Mankind now, in the round and with a capital "M". We were on the right lines, metaphysically, but we spun off into the oblivion of material thought some time in the 1830's, the so called Enlightenment. So astonished were we by the miracle of our own mechanical inventions we made a laughing stock of dreamers such as these. Wordsworth saw it as the steam of the money-men made inroads to his sylvan sanctuary, and he shook his fist at them, only for them to immortalise him in a fashion he would find horrific, frozen into a silly caricature on a chocolate box.

We were coming back on track though, I'm certain of it. It had

taken us a hundred years, and it might have taken a hundred more, but we were getting somewhere, though in the mean time it had taken the rape of the earth and it near destruction to bring us round. So, I trust there are other places like ours, out there in the universe. Other suns, other sweet earths where men have thought along the same lines, and will be spared to realise the flowering of a divine thought that we shall be denied.

But it has to matter. How can it not? Or are we to die having made no difference to anything at all? Well of course it doesn't matter. Peopl edie menaingless deaths every day. And no one notices. No one cares.

Rebecca touches me awake

"Dinner's about ready," she says. "You were sleeping." she brushes my cheeks with the back of her hands, dashes away the tears. "And you've been crying again?"

"I have?"

"Are you all right?"

I look about at the words and the thoughts. "It's the waste of it," I tell her.

"The waste?"

"All this wisdom. None of these thinkers need ever have lived. Not Wordsworth, Not Emerson, not Plato, none of them."

"Ah." She smiles wistfully. "But *we* have lived, Timothy, and incredible as it may seem in the time we've been together, we have *loved*. And don't you go telling me there was any waste in that."

Whittaker has offered us the attic room for the night, she tells me. There are camp beds and pillows and blankets up there. Though they may be a little dusty, she is sure she can fashion from them a secure nest for us. He has the little house next door. We'll be safe here 'till morning. She tells me all of this quickly and brightly, transforming fear and uncertainty into magic and blessings.

She is the perfect priestess.

They have set a table for three in the kitchen. Whittaker waits for us, and we sit down together. The fish and the vegetables smell delicious. Rebecca lays a hand on both mine and his. I imagine she about to say grace, so I bow my head dutifully, but she squeezes hard and whips the life back into us with a quick little flick of her wrists and she says: "Remember, gentlemen, we are not yet dead."

Chapter 43

We have begun to descend into the depths of the wood. Rebecca is leading me along the path I most fear, as I have always known she must. We have come at once upon a ravine, rocky, deep and dark, with a ferny fringe. And the way across it is revealed as a fallen tree, narrow, twisted, knotty, its silver bark worn smooth by the feet of others who have gone before us. Rebecca walks ahead, walks out over the void - always so much bolder than me - and I follow, thinking if we make haste, and cross quickly, I can control my fear. But then she stops half way and turns.

I'm thinking she wants to make a point of this, that the point is to examine my fear and steady myself over the void, but she reads these thoughts, shakes her head. No, she's saying, that is not the point at all. Then she takes a firm hold of both my wrists and steps off the log.

The point, she's saying, is not to care even if we fall.

The void is black and roaring, and there's a silver spray from a waterfall through which I am now plummeting. Then comes the sudden, cold shock of the deep folding over me, closing off my senses. Rebecca is still holding my wrists, and the feeling is akin to the afternoon when we swam in the tarn. But this not the tarn, not the shallow swimming of my safe mountain retreat. It represents more, I think, a sinking back into the depths of myself, plunged far into the water-pit, in the secret depth of the earth. I struggle against the urge to breathe, even though I know I cannot drown here, that everything is imagined, that my fear is the only thing I need to fear.

And all that.

Yes.

Dreaming Lewis.

We are sleeping, as I recall, on old fashioned camp beds, pressed together amid the dust of the attic of the bookshop. We are dreaming of a water pit, dreaming of it from a place that has lost its reason for going on into a new age, an age that cannot now dawn and will stall, come fall of night.

The ignominy is striking, laughable almost.

And the question I carry into the dream, *this dream*, carry it over from my final waking moments is: *does it matter*? I suspect not, but am hoping the dream will enlighten me to the contrary, give me a

thread of hope, that it might be worth returning once more to the surface of being.

Rebecca lets go of my wrists, then we can both swim, but takes hold of the collar of my jacket, so we rise together, surface together. Then there is a pale-moony darkness and a kind of air as we break the surface, or a least there is a freshness I can fill my imaginary lungs with. The body has such a residual image, Lewis: it's form, it's feel; and it lingers long after we have any practical need of it.

Now there's gravel under my knees, painful, stabbing, and Rebecca holding me by the arm, helping me to a muddy shore. Deep glutinous mud into which my hands sink, raising a sulphurous odour.

She gives a shudder and looks around, hugging herself, unsure, afraid - not the best of ingredients for an easy ride in the dreaming.

"Where are we sleeping, Tim?"

"In the bookshop. You don't remember making up the beds in the attic?"

"No. The last memory I have is cutting the head off a fish."

"Then you don't remember jumping from the path either, and pulling me with you?"

"What?"

"Never mind,... we're okay. Don't worry."

It was not Rebecca who jumped then? No, that was my beautiful vicar, my fantasy, my daemon. She was an incarnation of all the dreaming, and how I relate to it, and her relation to Rebecca is as yet a mystery. But it was *she* who brought me here, and *here* Rebecca has found me, and hauled me to the shore.

"And we're together?" she asks, still afraid. "I mean *sleeping* together?"

"Yes. We made the preparations theYoga. We intended this - well, not *this* exactly, but some deeper aspect of the dreaming."

She takes this is in, nods, wipes the back of her hand across her face and leaves a muddy smear.

Yes, it's okay, nothing else matters, she's thinking, *so long as we're together.*

But I'm not sure; the dream has an unusual quality about it this time. I remember those youths were still out on the street corner when we turned in, in defiance of the curfew. I had spied them from behind the curtain of our attic room. There is nothing of value in the bookshop, only books after all, but still, they might break in

for fun.

Dakinis?

I don't know what use my warrior girls are when the threat is anything more than imagined. But we're here now, wherever *this* is. Of course, there is no geography in the dreaming. I've told you this before, haven't I? It is overlaid with psyche, and therefore infinitely malleable so I am wondering now not *where*, but at what *depth* does this dreaming take place?

Yes, Lewis, there is a depth to things, at least in a manner of speaking. The deeper we go, the closer we are to God.

If God there be.

Are you still afraid of that word, Tim?

No, Lewis.

But what kind of God would stand by and let the earth be destroyed? Again, Timothy, remember the earth will likely survive; it's just us human beings who will cease to be. Perhaps then the mantel of higher consciousness will be taken up by the chimpanzee, or the dolphin?

We should wish them better luck, and fewer conflicts.

There's a moon just rising behind a jagged silhouette of pines, and is reflected in the lake from which we have just staggered. So far so good; it is at least something recognisable: a lake, a bowl of pine forested mountains, a rising moon - not too abstract; I can work with this. My mind seeks the likelihood of a dwelling, a warm light to guide us, but there is only the lake and trees, and the darkness - impenetrable, inescapable. Then I hear a creature moving in the forest close by: snorting, crashing through the undergrowth. It is a horse perhaps, or a gorilla on all fours.

Rebecca is alarmed, places a hand over her heart: "What the *fuck* was that?"

"Are vicars allowed to say the F word?"

She's spooked now, and does not respond to humour. Instead she stares intently at the impenetrable darkness ahead. "Timothy, darling, shut up. I am cold, and wet."

"No you're not. Not really."

"Saying that doesn't help the fact that I am *wet*."

Indeed it does not. We're both shivering now. There is an authenticity to the sensual aspects of this dreaming that would do justice to any waking reality. I search my pockets for clues, and discover my survival-flint with striker. How convenient! There is

tinder-dry grass on the bank, also a profusion of twigs and logs. We gather the ingredients for a fire. The first touch of the flint releases a shower of sparks and the fire takes. The similarity between this situation and a computer survival game is not lost on me.

Have we passed the first test of crafting, I wonder?

And what is the next level, please?

"Handy that," she says. "You don't have a change of clothes in your pocket too, do you?"

"Rebecca, we're dreaming. The fire is a comfort, something to soothe our nerves. It's *psychological*. If we want dry clothes we shall have to dream them dry."

She closes her eyes as if to concentrate, shivering all the while, teeth chattering. "No, it's not working."

So,...

We are not the programmers here, Lewis. There is a hierarchy to the dreaming, you see? Only among the more shallow levels are we free to paint the dream as we see fit. Only among the shallows can we turn a corner, or open a door and be setting our feet back upon familiar ground, safe ground. But other dreamers tell stories of holes, passageways, voids down which the dreamer can fall into a deeper layer, one where it's not so easy to get around, and where the way is held in shape by a stronger imagination, or as in the dream of London, by the collective dreaming of all Londoners.

But this is not London.

This is an empty place that seems in want of filling.

Surely, it should not be so firm, so unyielding to our will as this.

Again we hear a sound from the forest; an aggressive cracking of branches, and a powerful movement through undergrowth.

It's nearer.

Heading our way.

Of course it is.

We are drawing it towards us!

What else do we expect?

We are squatting by the fire, warming our hands. Rebecca cosies up against my shoulder. “Was it Rita Hayworth who starred in that film with the giant ape?” she asks.

“You mean King Kong? No,... that was Fay Wray.”

“You're sure?"

"I'm certain. Why?"

"Hated that film as a child. Remember that scene where it comes

rushing out of the forest? Made me wet my knickers, that bit."

"Well, it was Fay Wray. All right? Now, try to think of something else, or King Kong is what we'll get, and I'm not sure how to deal with that."

"It's not going to make any difference to what's out there though, is it? We're powerless in this one. No frothy beer and bacon butties at cosy wayside inns this time."

"That's as may be, but remember, whatever happens, we cannot be harmed. Even if it *is* King Kong and it runs at us snorting snot and brimstone, it cannot hurt us."

"A part of me knows that's true, Tim, but just the same, I think I'd like to wake up. There's something about this place that doesn't feel so nice. In fact, I'm a little scared. More than a little to be honest."

"I understand, but we need to get used to it, Rebecca, because there'll come a time when waking up will no longer be an option."

We hear the sound again. Hooves, galloping, then stalling. A horse; it's definitely a horse! But does the horse have a rider?

She nudges me with her shoulder. "What about your warrior girls? Don't you think we could use their help?"

"Already put in the request."

"Then where are they? Maybe they can't reach us here."

"They'll be here. There's a crowd of youths topside to deal with first."

There comes another sound, this time from the water, the sound of a boat beaching against shingle. We turn to see a skiff, four of my girls at the oars, one standing in the bows with a lantern. She's swathed in layers of a gossamer-thin gauze, hand outstretched, beckoning for us to come aboard. Two missing then - must be keeping watch topside.

Is the danger real?

I take a little courage from her smile, feel myself returning to a dream easiness.

"Very nice," says Rebecca, tartly. "Dress them yourself do you?"

"Do you want a ride out of here or not?"

"Only joking. But when we get a chance, I'd like you to show me how to conjure up a harem of my own. See how you like it."

"All beefcake blokes, oiled pecks, taut bums and no brains, I presume. How predictable of you, Reverend."

"Not as predictable as you. These girls will catch their death

dressed that way. Cover them, Timothy. Anyway, you're wrong. I'd prefer my animus harem to be a little more cerebral. Sages with swords if you know what I mean."

"Lao Tzu, Confucious, Gandalf the Grey, who else?"

"Ooh, interesting line-up. I'd want Wordsworth and Coleridge, and Fred Astaire of course."

"One more - you need seven."

"I do? How about Hector?"

"Hector who?"

"You know, the dog from Hector's house - dum di diddly do di-diddly dum do do, dum do do,..."

She's losing her grip, lacking coherence. Perhaps she's waking. "Okay, it's your harem. But it sounds a little crazy to me."

"You've no room to talk, Magwoan. These girls look like something out of an adolescent fantasy comic-book."

This is true.

But also I have never seen my girls as clearly as I see them now. In the past there has always been something transparent about them, and distant. This direct interaction is also rare enough to make me nervous. They hold out their hands as we come down to the water's edge, and guide us aboard. They have warm flesh tonight, and a firmness to their grip. There is a scent of Frankincense, Myrrh, temple fragrances, something holy.

They use their oars to push us back out over the deep of the lake. Rebecca and I sit huddled between them and they fold blankets over us, warming us, comforting us. Again there is a scent of divinity. I am glad for their presence. The dream had become too eerie for me, but now I find the courage to explore it.

Rebecca nods and smiles her thanks, subdued now, respectful in their presence. She whispers: "Don't they speak?"

"Not unless they're pretending to be someone else. They don't need to. I always know what they're thinking."

"How does that work?"

"They're extensions of my own psyche of course."

"Oh,... that explains it, obviously."

We've begun to make way now, a purpose to our direction at last.

In the presence of my warrior girls, I try to stop speculating on the nature of what we felt and heard onshore, and what was meant by it, for even in sleep I feel myself too weary at times to do

anything but glide along with the flow of things.

The Infinite is a very big place, Lewis. Some thinkers have concluded there is space enough for an infinity of outcomes to every life, some more probable than others. It's unlikely I'm married to Rita Hayworth, or Fay Wray, or Ingrid Bergman for that matter, but somewhere beyond this curtain of dark, in the tail ends of the Gaussian curve of a quantum probability, I'm led to believe I am indeed married to each of them. But more likely I married Miranda, and we divorced, and in later life I hooked up with a strange, and sweetly vulnerable priestess called Rebecca Rayworth. And somewhere around the median line is the other probability, where all is as I remember it, but a reality in which the asteroid passes wide instead of plunging deep into the heart of the earth.

One of the girls pauses in her rowing and motions with her eyes to the shore. We follow her gaze to where a creature has emerged from the forest and is now standing proud by the water - brilliant white, a flowing mane - a beautiful horse. But then I see the horn. A *Unicorn*, Lewis. Imagine that! No, stay with me - a unicorn is permissible here, for I am dreaming it, remember? More than dreaming, we are in the mythic levels, the levels from which all stories rise. And the unicorn is stunning, and all the more beautiful for its strangeness.

I have never plunged so deep as this before.

I am in awe of it.

What shall be our story, I wonder. But what use are stories? What use are myths if there is no one to listen to them any more, nowhere for us to rise from our dreams? Rebecca reads my thoughts, shudders and sinks a little lower in the boat, draws the blanket more closely around her shoulders.

"Oh, this is a weird one, Tim."

I'm wondering if we're ready for it, wondering what might lie ahead. Perhaps we should bail out. "Try counting from a hundred backwards. It might wake you. I'll do it too. Whoever wakes first, wakes the other, but gently. Okay?"

"Okay. Deal."

She closes her eyes and begins to count. I see her lips forming the numbers and I'm about to join her but fancy I see a light ahead; it's a single flame flickering yellow and low down over the water, a faint line of reflected light, like a gossamer thread tying us to it. One of the girls sees me looking and nods, as if to confirm my

thoughts - nothing surprising in this since these girls are my thoughts. They reflect too a sudden unease, for I note that now they are more stoutly clad in an elaborate armour of hide and steel breastplates, beneath weighty cloaks of Phoenician purple. I note also the hilts of swords showing at the ready. Yes indeed, Rebecca is right: an adolescent comic book fantasy.

Nothing wrong in that.

I've heard clever adepts say all Romantic fancies must end in lust, that they can play no part in the true alchemist's quest that, as in my early visions of the beautiful vicar,I'm staring something in the face, being presented with a source of great spiritual power and meaning, and all I'll end up doing is trying to fuck it. But these girls would turn to harpies if I thought them so cheap, and they do not whisper such invitations in my ear. If it's lust I want, I can and *have* found it a plenty here.

But sex in the dreaming makes you all the more lonely on waking.

It is a self defeating thing.

One must have reached a certain age, I think,...

Anyway,...

We seem to be nearing a firmer destination now. There's a structure materialising from the blackness, a jetty to receive us, stone steps rising from the water to a promenade that skirts the crenellated battlements of a medieval castle keep. On the jetty a single torch is burning - one of those ancient staff-dipped-in-tar things. The girls make the boat steady, and I climb out. There's nothing else here. The castle walls are all in darkness and they rise sheer, impregnable.

I'm at a loss.

The empty feeling of the dream is deeply puzzling. Chilling. Disturbing. Is this all there is? The girls make fast the boat and form a protective circle around me, hands on the hilts of their weapons, scanning for threat, but there is none.

There is simply,...

Nothing.

The warrior within us - the ego - will fight this, Lewis. But when one is a speck of dust in the midst of infinite darkness, the warrior needs another way. I take a breath and ask the dream, inwardly, for guidance, for however deep we dream, the dream projectionist is always one level, one dimension, beyond. And if we are respectful and sincere, and clear in our request,...

He will grant us our wish.

At once, the girls pick out another light, far off in the darkness, and all point to it. The dream has answered. My thoughts are as one, the implication clear: we must move towards the light, for the dream is guiding us.

I look for Rebecca, then we might set out together, but she's no longer with us. I feel a moment of panic, then a tug as she wakes me from the other side.

"Tim,... Tim,..."

I'm caught once more in attachment. I abandon the quest and return to Rebecca’s side.

Chapter 43

I wake to a feeling of back-achy stiffness, induced I suppose, by the indifferent quality of the camp bed. Rebecca is sitting, facing away from me now, perched on the edge of her bed, her head in her hands. She's breathing strangely, deeply, as if to quell a rising panic. I don't understand; did she wake me or didn't she? I reach over, place my hand upon her back; she twitches with shock, then turns and lends me a half smile.

"Okay, Rebecca?"

"Hmm?"

It's still small-hours dark, and there is light from a moon coming in through the dusty windows. But for the moonlight, the town is in complete darkness.

"Powercut, I think," she says. There's a forced brightness about her now that I do not trust.

"It was a strange dream," I tell her. "But I think it was leading somewhere. There was no need to be afraid. We should have ridden it out."

A shiver rises through her and she hugs herself.

"Cold," she says.

I hear the tinkle of a tin can on the street as it's kicked along, then the flat footed slap-slap slapping of a lone runner. There's a yelp - animal-like, drunken; there are trolls about. So much for your curfew, Lewis. Where are your coppers, now? Sorry, I'm forgetting, your remit is no longer to protect; only to watch while we drown in the shit you have stirred.

I move to the window and part the fragile nets so I can look down. There's but a narrow slit of street visible between the rooftops, and I can see no one. I check my watch. No watch. Rebecca still wears it.

"Fancy a brew?" I ask.

She does not reply but remains sitting on the edge of the camp-bed, wearing only a teeshirt. She doesn't look all there, as if still half asleep. It puzzles me. I kneel before her, touch her shoulder, lower my face to hers and ask again, gently: "Brew, Rebecca?"

She's not listening, staring ahead into space. Then it strikes me: *Dreamshock.*

She didn't wake me, Lewis. We're both still sleeping. I'm lucid,

she's not,.. she's lost somewhere in the upper layers of the dreaming, perhaps on the edge of waking for real, while I'm still trapped more deeply in the dreaming, somewhere. I fold her back under the covers. She goes down with a gentle compliance, like a somnambulist, and I look around at our environment, reading it for clues.

This is remarkable!

There are books, towers of books, surrounding us in teeter totter piles. But there are no treasures of antiquity here. It's where the Whittakers keeps their junk - the coffee table books publishers only sell at Christmas, dust-jackets now faded back to reveal the transient nature of their secular wisdom.

There are photography books boasting the cutting edge of 3 Megapixel cameras, the fleeting glitter and the empty promises of materialistic progress? of technology, Lewis? Then we have the glory days of motoring - the uselessness of nostalgia; then the vaguely homoerotic macho titles: Boxing, Karate: men with broad, bare chests and muscles, and oriental tattoos. I'm wondering about that,... smiling at Rebecca's description of her own dream guardsmen,... *more cerebral*, she'd said.

Sages with swords.

There's a sound, downstairs, a door banging, a floorboard creaking. Is Whittaker still about? Or is that flicker of alarm no more than a residue of my own anxiety?

Dakinis, Timothy.

Quickly!

Where are your girls?

There are two on the landing outside my door, three wandering the labyrinthine corridors of the book-shop below. They tread silently, drift like wraiths, blades drawn - short blades now for close quarter encounters with whatever ails me. The other two keep watch on the street outside, patrolling, cloaked, or hiding in the shadows of the doorways. These girls might be cerebral too, I don't know, I have never tested it. But I am plagued with irrational fears, and am merely glad for their proficiency with arms.

I make my way downstairs, descending the spiral stairway between floors, descending fast to the front of the shop. The door is open, the wood around the lock splintered. It has been forced open. Violence, Lewis! Violence has come in from street level while we slumbered in our attic tower, and I was too slow in gathering my

defences! Whatever is stalking us here is already inside the shop.

The girls from the street enter now. One takes the kitchen and the study, the other moves upstairs.

You might think I could quell this storm by simply thinking calmer thoughts, but even you must know that once an irrational darkness grips us, it can be a devil to shake. And shaking it is what these girls are about. They are symbols, you see? They are dream symbols, as is everything really, symbolic of the psychical life that rises through us.

Running back upstairs, I'm arrested on the first landing by the sight of one of my girls, her blade held against the Adams apple of a shaven headed, tattooed bruiser. He leans, spread eagled against the bookcase. His trousers are open, a huge penis aggressively erect and bearing hideous tattoos, depicting cavorting devils tormenting helpless women. It leaves little doubt as to his purpose.

"Who are you?"

He makes no reply, nor does he fear the blade, but only waits for my girl to lose herself a moment in my thoughts. Then he will be free again. I motion with my eyes and she dispatches him with an efficient thrust. There's no blood; he simply deflates into the shadows. But there are three of these randy fiends, as I recall. Are these Rebecca's fears, I wonder? I thought we'd done with this, that she had somehow danced her way to freedom from her Nemesis, shamed him into dust.

Or have we only splintered him?

Or are these fears my own?

Fears that I cannot protect her?

The threatened woman is a common motif in dreams. It is the dreamer's shadow who threatens her, holds her captive, but only if the woman is a pattern for the dreamer's soul. Only *then* does such a dream make sense, and though Rebecca may be many things to me, she is not my Soul. She is her own self, and true. I released my own self long ago from such petty projections.

It is Emma who is my soul projection now.

Safer that way.

That the centuries separate us.

Is this then more a vision of the rapine to be unleashed in these last days of the world? Or is it something a closer to home?

Something angry and confused,... in me?

Heavy footsteps are crossing the floor, upstairs. They crack the

boards and release a shower of dust. We move as one, clattering up the stairs to find another bruiser, lying prone, half buried beneath a pile of books that have spilled from the shelves. He has a blade pressed against the back of his neck, held there by the girl who stands over him. A nod from me and he too is dispatched. Among the books that tumble into the space he occupied I note a much thumbed and curiously stained copy of the "Joy of sex".

Very funny.

I enter once more the attic room, where I left Rebecca, but my view is obscured by the wide muscular back, to say nothing of the clenched, bare, muscular buttocks of a tattooed man who is standing over Rebecca. His arms are spread and he stands on tip-toe, muscles taut, frozen. I move around him, curious, and see another of my girls at Rebecca's head, a blade held to the bruiser's throat, holding him away from Rebecca's sleeping form. She looks to me for permission, and I nod my assent. A quick thrust and he deflates to shadow.

Rebecca remains peacefully unaware.

The girls resume their guard and I settle by the window now to watch over her.

The dreaming is a place of paradox, Lewis. On the one hand, I ask for direction and it reveals a light to guide me. In another, I turn my back and but for a moment's thought, it would have me witness the defilement of my one and only love, by devilish forces beyond my ken. I ask it now for explanation and its only response is a thinning of the light into a murky kind of dawn.

The last time I was here, in Penrith, in the dreaming, I was with Emma. Ground zero, she'd said, and the denizens had that day included the tattooed bruisers. I remember them doffing their caps to her, showing her their deference, their mute obedience.

Is it Emma then who darkens things?

Did she send them?

Is she not my muse, not my soul?

Is she the evil within me?

Am I wrestling with myself, here?

I split the guard. Leave five Dakinis in the dream of Whittaker's bookshop to watch over Rebecca. The remaining two I bid accompany me and I exit the door into a wilderness of dark.

The bookshop is gone and what stands instead is a low circular dwelling, thatched, like an iron age hut, upon a waste of moor.

Dawn is breaking into a vanilla sky, and before me a single torch, a staff dipped in tar, and burning. The girls draw their cloaks about them even as I'm feeling the chill of the wind myself. And in the distance, on the skyline of the heath, another staff, reduced by distance to something like a lit match. There is no other marker.

Once more the dream has shown me way and there seems a dogged coherence to it. The girls begin their march, and I follow my thoughts wherever they might lead.

The dawn is long, suspended in time to lend sufficient contrast, so the flame stands out against a glowering sky, but when we reach it there is nothing but a waste of dusty heath, and another such marker set against the same moody rim of heaven. One of the girls points at it with her blade. The other holds out her hand and bids join us a string of ponies, ready saddled. They canter up obediently, and we ride out.

A strange dream, this, Lewis, but I warn you we all have it coming at some point, and its for each of us to make our peace as best we can with it. I'd thought I was preparing a smoother path than this though, a downy path to a Summerland of fresh fruit and vegetables, and swimming in the tarn by the cabin, and drawing down eternity to each morning, and sunrise with Rebecca's face upon the heaven scented pillow beside mine.

Rebecca smiling.

Rebecca giggling as we make love.

Attachment, Lewis.

But oh, the sweetness of it!

I think about it all again, but objectively, trying to remain in the dreaming, conscious that the last time I pondered too hard it I was kicked out.

No, not kicked out, Timothy; you were deflected by your fears.

It was your fears that threatened Rebecca.

To love someone is to form the biggest of our attachments. Thus there arises the fear, that things might not always be so well between you, that the love might not last, and you will be alone again - proof in full the tattooed bruisers don’t do Emma's bidding, but mine. Human love is not the same as that of the divine. With human love we fear to let go, to let it be. It's the only thing that keeps us in the world. If we are to realise a divine love, we must learn to let go willingly, while resting content in the knowledge we cannot lose it.

I don't know if this means anything to you, Lewis.

We find the torch once more set in the midst of a wilderness. The girls waste no time and are already cantering off towards the next marker - another torch against the skyline. And then another and another, until at length we come upon a torch, set like all the others in the peaty earth, but this time there is no other marker to lead us on, nor even the one we have just left, to guide us back.

So I ask the dream: "And now?"

The dawn retreats into a darker sky, so the brighter stars return. Then comes a low rumbling and a flaming projectile, brighter even than the sun and moving faster than I can think. It breaches the atmosphere, trailing flames and sulphur, to impact the earth beyond my horizon.

I had not expected it to be so fast.

It was a streak of light.

It was the blink of an eye!

There's a delayed convulsion of the earth, so our ponies rise in alarm. I'm wondering if this is real, or imagined, and if my girls are evolved enough in the ways of the dreaming to protect me even from such an eruption of the psyche as this. For a moment it isn't that I fear oblivion. Indeed from what I've seen this past few hours, I'm thinking oblivion might be the sweeter end. But I've spent this latter part of my life proving to myself oblivion is a philosophical absurdity, that immortality is more likely our natural state, that we shall wander for ever the landscape of the deeper psyche, and since I have already seen many a fine land to settle in, I have no worries on that score.

But attachment brings the storms and the sterile wastes, such as this. In the dreaming and the dying, those attached to earthly things cannot linger long before reawakening to some new condition in the material world. But what if there is no material world to re-awaken to? What then for those, like me, who can't let go? Is this not also a philosophical absurdity? To be sure it is, but only if I'm wrong, only if there's nothing more to dreams than indigestion, only if all thoughts of an independent psychical existence beyond space and time are merely wishful thinking.

My God, Lewis! Can it really be true?

Is all that awaits us now a pointless annihilation by virtue of an equally pointless rock from space.

Are we really *nothing* after all?

Chapter 44

Rebecca is washed and dressed, her hair a voluminous haystack. She smiles as she hands me the teacup and saucer. It is my first proper waking moment, and to open my eyes to such a scene as this warms my heart - I mean that anyone could look so tenderly upon me. I have never known such a love as this, Lewis. Never known such a complete attachment to another human being, and consequently such a profound fear of its loss. Surely it was never like this with Miranda. There was always a distance between us, no real connection, a space held always in reserve, then we might safely retreat from one another when things were not going well. But this? This is all or nothing!

It must mean something.

It *has* to.

Compassion and love are the middle names of creation. Anything else is surely of our own invention.

And it *cannot* be wrong to feel this way.

"Three flights of stairs," she's saying, "on a peg leg, and not a single drop spilt. I trust you're as impressed as I am."

I can smell the mustiness of the old books around us, smell the staleness of the air, and a sweaty pungency that I presume is my own. All seems convincingly real. I make other careful checks as I slowly test my way back into reality, but solipsism is a hard one to beat, and sometimes you have to trust in the simple things.

Like scent.

"Are you all right, Tim? You were impossible to wake just now?"

I slide myself carefully into a sitting position and take a sip of tea, grateful for its sweetness. It all feels real, at least enough for me to risk in its consistency and I venture to linger.

"Sorry,... it was a rough journey."

"I don't remember much of it," she says. "Falling, swimming, a lake ,... something about King Kong? Then a boat, and your girls dressed like beach babes. And for some reason since waking up I can't get the theme tune to Hector's House out of my head. It all seems a bit mad to me, though at the time it felt convincing enough. But then dreams are like that aren't they?"

"They were *not* dressed like beach babes. If you saw them that way, that's your problem."

"Ooh, *touchy* this morning?"

I try to sit up a little more, but the camp bed won't allow it and I get a warning twinge from my lower back. It's telling me I should be careful. This is late middle age, Lewis, old wounds: one stab from that sciatic nerve, and I'll be unable to move for days. Making love in the shower was, after all, a little ambitious.

"All traditions talk about reincarnation, don't they?" I ask.

"Eh?" She's puzzled by this switch in direction, also concerned and raises her brows in defence. "A little early for theology, Tim? At least let me put my collar on."

"I'm serious."

"I can see that. What's put you in this mood? Was the journey really so rough as that?"

"I think I saw the end of the world."

"Okay," she concedes. "It's doesn't get much worse that."

"There was a bleakness to it, Rebecca, an emptiness, a sense of random, meaningless endings, you know, like when someone gets killed crossing the road? And so what? It means nothing. If we worked in an accident and emergency unit we'd see this all the time - lives ending suddenly and meaninglessly, and quite randomly *all the time*, but we don't, so it's easier to pretend it isn't true.

"I was following a trail, like we do in books, and each a marker leading us on to the next, but in an infinity of waste. I felt it was telling me we're going nowhere, and at some point we'll look back and see no trace of where we came from either. Each beacon was like,... like those books of philosophy downstairs and the words of all the sages, each one leading us on, providing a temporary comfort, a sense of direction in the wilderness, but ultimately,.... meaningless."

Rebecca gives a sarcastic whistle. "It *was* a bad dream. I'm glad I bailed out when I did. I just wish I'd pulled you out sooner, too. You obviously can't be trusted in the dreaming on your own any more." She gives a shudder.

"But reincarnation, Rebecca?"

"Okay,... well,... reincarnation: very Buddhist of course, and Hindu. Some claim there's room for it in Christian theology, though in my opinion, what we're talking about there is a psychical rebirth - something attainable in our own lifetime."

"But those who talk about it,... reincarnation to where?"

"Well, back here of course. It's like there's only certain things we

can learn here. It's the best place to evolve, I mean inwardly. That's the theory anyway, isn't it? You should be telling me this. This is your field, not mine. There's some curious evidence that supports it, like children who remember past lives. But nothing's beyond sceptical attack, Tim. You know that."

"I know, but what if there's nowhere to come back to. Doesn't that make a nonsense of the whole thing?"

"Oh,... I see where you're going. No human beings left into which one might reincarnate? No earth. Good point. And interesting. A philosophical conundrum!" She thinks for a moment, decides to be flippant. "Well, maybe we'll reincarnate somewhere else, another planet. I mean, that Kepler telescope has found thousands of them, hasn't it? Ironic, don't you think? We can deduce earth-like blue-green worlds light years away, but we miss the rogue rock that's been lurking next door and is going to wipe us out."

"Other worlds? Is that not a bit,... weak?"

"Why? Maybe I'll come back with two heads and three arms on a planet with four moons, and we'll mate by spitting at one another. I don't know. You started it."

"Other *worlds*, Rebecca?"

"All right, you don't like that one? Well, how about it's another earth, an earth that veered off down another time-line, one where it still exists come September. Or maybe you're right, maybe this is it. Maybe this *is* the end of our time. Or maybe enough of us will survive to allow a limited return, but with a significantly altered mindset. It could be the new Eden that this asteroid ushers in. Except, they'll have forgotten how to dream." She shakes her head, looks glum, then takes me by the shoulders and lowers her eyes to mine. "Look, you know there are no clear, comforting answers to any of this, Tim. It's the job of the priesthood to pretend there are, for the comfort of others, while protecting them from the rather more complicated truth that we just don't fucking know what happens, but that whatever happens, we'll still be okay. Okay?"

"Will we?"

She holds my face, kisses my forehead, rubs some life back into my shoulders. "Come on Timbo, this is no time for a crisis of faith. We've been places, seen things. Maybe we don't understand them, and maybe we're not meant to, but we know there is a psychical dimension, the other side of consciousness."

"But,... what if we died, in our sleep? How long before the dream fades to blackness. How long before our awareness dissolves?"

"It doesn't, Tim. It gets sharper. We both know that, and every near death study there's ever been tells the same story. Now, listen, I don't know what's brought this on, but you have to snap out of it. You pagans are all the same. You're all ritual and no connection, *no real faith*. Except *you* have the connection, but seem to keep losing it. Which is why I trust you."

"Trust me? Why?"

"Because no one sane can be a hundred percent certain."

"Faith?"

"Yes, Tim. Faith. Remember the goodness inside of you. The feel of it. No use learning the runes if there's no goodness, no *connection*. Without the goodness all you see are a bunch of fucking,... fucking,..."

"Stones?"

"Damned right."

I take a breath. "Okay. Sorry. You're right. No time for a crisis of faith."

"It doesn't matter if the earth dies, because the earth doesn't exist. Remember? Nothing exists! That's what you said once."

"Was I drunk at the time? You'd have to be drunk to talk like that."

She gives me a patient look. "You don't drink. Though I'd like to see you drunk, just once, before we go. I'd like to see the fully unzipped Timothy."

"Okay, but it's not a pretty sight."

She laughs. I feel the mood shifting. I have passed rock bottom, and she is lifting me once more to the surface.

"I'm sorry, Rebecca. The dream's shaken me up. Nothing seems real this morning. I'm not sure of anything."

"Well I'm sure of this: We don't dream in *my* head. We don't dream in *your* head. So where do we dream, Tim? We meet up *in* the dreaming. But where is the dreaming, Tim?"

"I don't know."

"The dreaming is nowhere. Because no thing exists. *Nothing*! That's the only way anything can exist at all. Though you may not realise it, it's the most sensible thing you've ever said."

I give her a wry smile. "I should warn you though, I have a habit

of talking out of my arse."

"Ah, but it's such a lovely arse, Timbo - I mean for a man of your age. Two lovely ripe handfuls."

So,...

Whittaker has scrounged half a loaf and three eggs in exchange for two potatoes and a carrot. Not a bad deal, considering the labour that went into making the bread. Clearly the new economy will be some time adjusting to itself. He slices the bread thinly and pops it into the toaster before realising the power has gone.

"We'll have to toast it over the gas ring," says Rebecca.

Remember Lewis, there is always another way.

For myself, I'm thinking I don't really need to eat, that I can manage a while yet off last night's feast of stolen trout, but Rebecca tells me there's no knowing what the day will bring, and we're as well filling up while we can. Whittaker agrees, sharing a rare anecdote of his army days, seventy years ago, that between skirmishes one ate and slept, because there was no guarantee when the next opportunity would arise. So we sit down to an improvised breakfast of eggs and tinned chopped tomatoes on partially carburised toast.

He asks if we slept well, and apologises that he was unable to offer us more comfortable lodgings. Rebecca tells him that on the contrary we were very comfortable indeed. She has no memory of her first waking into a non-lucid dreaming, no subliminal unease over the devils who broke into our space, bent on rapine - because, I'm sure the devils were my own, that the space too had been, exclusively my own.

That I'm still capable of generating such a world troubles me. It underlines the fact I am not capable of lingering long in the dreaming without courting the disaster of profoundly disturbing nightmares; few of us are. It demands a faculty of mind beyond that with which we are familiar. We can trick it by calling down the protection of gentler thoughts, but eternity is a long time and the dreaming will soon be our only option. I dare not imagine now what other nightmares I am capable of, and this is not merely on account of the fact I have grown so attached to Rebecca.

Only a Boddhisatva can be assured of a smooth journey into the afterlife, I mean without the need for a return ticket. But who among us are anywhere near such an attainment? A return ticket is essential for the rest of us at some point. So I ask again: does this

prove the absurdity of belief in the spiritual dimension? Can it be, after all I've told you, that everything I have been exploring in my later life has been a monumental delusion?

I wouldn't be the first.

"A return ticket please."

"Sorry son, we're all out of those. Return destination's been wiped out you see?"

Things have not gone well these past days, Lewis, yet as Rebecca said: this is no time for a crisis of faith.

But still: where do we dream, Lewis?

Nowhere.

Because nothing exists.

It's the only thing that explains how anything can exist at all!

What?

There are times when that statement makes perfect sense, but this is not one of them.

She has not yet fixed her collar, but seems to be growing used to the feel of it, as I am growing used to seeing her in it, and growing by degrees to value more her wisdom from a tradition I thought I had rejected. And she is wrong: I think I would have no difficulty, being married to a vicar like this one, though I suspect in any return to normality, she would not be invited to remain a vicar for very long.

She would be too restless, too progressive, too spiky in her quest, and in her service of others she would be for ever poking them into action, into questioning the status quo. Not for Rebecca the bland endorsement and the rubber stamp of a religious orthodoxy. And thus, being not a Pharisee, she would most likely wind up with a congregation of one:

Me.

She asks Whittaker if he will assist in applying the tape to her collar. He is glad to oblige, and she uses the opportunity to ask if he is afraid. He replies that he is not, that the older one gets, the more one simply disregards the significance of death. He then explains he how he has taken up a class in Spanish, that even though he will likely never visit Spain, he sees no absurdity in it. He would like to read Cervantes, he says, and see if anything was lost in translation.

I'm watching them from a distance as they speak. Rebecca listens with a quiet grace, then takes his hand and squeezes it gratefully.

The touch of the priestess.

I feel the blessing in it.

I wish him well as we make ready to leave, ask if there's anything he needs, and can we bring it? We cannot feed the whole of Penrith with the vegetables we grow at the cabin, but we can feed those we know, those we love. This will be the way of things in the future, for those, if any, who survive. He tells me he has all he needs, that we are welcome to return any time, asks jokingly if I'd be interested in buying an old, worthless bookshop when this whole thing blows over. I tell him that I might, and as Rebecca and I set out into the morning, I realise I mean it. What finer end for a dusty old English teacher than to moulder into obscurity among the forgotten wisdom and the superseded technology of unwanted, worm eaten, second hand books.

I take a breath, taste the fresh morning air, feel it trying to lift me.

It fails.

"I presume he's being ironic, Rebecca. I mean when he talks about things blowing over."

She takes my arm, and we begin to match our pace, find our balance together once more. There is comfort in this, in the *feel* of her, Lewis. It shields me from all manner of doubt.

"He's made his peace with it," she says. "Live or die, he's content either way."

"There's something sage like about him, don't you think?"

"Everyone can be our guru if we read them right, Tim."

The morning is cool, and there's a layer of dew on the cold surfaces of parked vehicles. Metal making water, as the old Chinese would say. The sky has opened pink, with a smattering of puffy chocolate clouds over the eastern horizon. In the west, sepia stained nimbus rise in columns, vaguely threatening, while a teasing wind stirs the cartons from old chip-suppers, sends them cart-wheeling down the street. There's no one about and the lack of noise is deafening.

For a moment I phase out, and suddenly the woman beside me is wearing a long frock. Her hold on me is different. I know who it is, but hesitate to look in case this means something, and I spoil the moment. I hear the rhythmical tapping of hooves on cobble, the creak of an old cart, and I remember the last time I was here with Emma, how she described it as queer with its traffic noise and

smell.

A shudder passes through me.

Rebecca pulls me close, pulls me back, reassures me. "Someone walking over your grave, Tim?"

"Probably. Except, like you pointed out, we won't have one."

"Ha!"

There's a small queue forming outside the grocer's shop, rumours they'll be giving away produce today. I feel the urge to join it, but Rebecca reminds me we have everything we need. Then we see a car and everyone stares at it. Only certain roads are grid-locked and access to them has been sealed, while cops wonder how best to traffic-manage a nationwide snarl-up. People can still potter locally, as we did, along the back lanes, but the eeriness of this lone car passing, and all of us staring at it is too much for me and I zone out again.

Horse and cart, clip clopping, a shadow-form slipping down a dusty alley. I jerk my head after it.

Rebecca anchors me, jerks my arm. "Tim?"

"Sorry, strange thoughts today. Look, it doesn't matter, does it? I mean,... Penrith will always be here, and people in it, just not in this time, but in moments past. It's like you said, maybe there's more than just the one earth. Maybe an infinity of them."

"Yes."

"But what if those moments all play out simultaneously, so you and I will exist always, somewhere, in the past. Only it's not really the past, is it? It's a present moment that's always there, but sort of spread out sideways, not backwards or forwards."

Where am I getting this from? Has Emma just whispered it in my ear?

"You mean like a gramophone record? Everything's there, all the time, but we only hear the bit the needle's actually sitting on?"

"Exactly. I mean,... I think"

"But it's a one time play, Tim, and once the tune's over, they smash the record. What's past may still be there, like you say, but it's longer accessible, is it? No longer playable."

"Why not?"

"I don't know. You'd need a time machine or something. I'd very much like to be twenty five again but it's not possible is it?"

"I suppose not. It's just,... when I meet up with Emma, it's not that she's a spirit, more that she's dreaming from her own time. And

the dreaming is this timeless place, this nexus, like a central junction, with travellers arriving from all over."

"But we each must wake back into our own time, following that coherent time-line, Tim. And we only get the one time, the one track." She laughs. "A one track mind."

"Must we? I don't know."

She tightens her grip on my arm. "You're starting to worry me now. Travelling back in time to a previous point in our lives? Time travel, using dreams as our vehicle? That makes mutual lucid dreaming sound positively pedestrian! Could that be the coded bit, I mean in Emma's journal? Are we staring at a way out of this, every time we sleep?"

I turn cold of a sudden -usually the sign of some sort of insight, but what kind? And at what price? No,... it's too early in the morning to be bending my head with the implications of that one. Rebecca agrees, and suggests we distract ourselves by investigating the railway station.

Penrith is on the west-coast main-line, as is Middleton. If the trains are running we could be home in a few hours. But the trains are not running, and there are people sleeping outside the station in a queue, huddled in sleeping bags, umbrellas raised as makeshift tents, as if waiting for the January sales. There are rumours the trains might be running tomorrow, but nothing is certain. Mainline power is intermittent, signalling is unreliable, and there are not enough diesel locomotives to go around.

All of this is rumour.

There are no facts.

Discouraged, we make our way out of town, head back towards our crossing of the motorway. I'm not sure what we have learned by any of this, nor what we have achieved, other than shaking my confidence in everything I thought was true. It can mean only one of two things: that everything I thought was true is *not* true, or I am on the verge of a revelation that makes what I thought was true seem simplistic by comparison. I trust in the revelation, but also fear it.

Fear I am not up to it.

Overnight, the situation on the motorway has worsened. Drivers are losing patience and seeking to squeeze down the hard shoulders in both directions, but these too have stagnated now. The fluorescent troll is not guarding his bridge, and we cross it

unhindered, pausing for a while to gaze down at the scene. Some vehicles have even sought to make way on the grass verges but have slithered to a halt in mud, their progress hindered where they have come up against pitched tents. We see the troll is down there with them, writing things in his notebook.

Drivers remonstrate and jab fingers.

The calm of the collective is turning into a collective rant, unfocussed, panicky. I cannot watch, feel the urge to move on, to pretend none of this is so. Meanwhile, Rebecca looks on with compassion, the light of something eternally good reflected in her eyes, and I fear she would go down to calm them, yet in so doing be consumed uselessly by their needs.

I wish we had not come, but that we did feels important. It can't take many more days of this to bring out the worst in people. Starved of information, misled by inaccurate, mischievous and lazy reporting, and so many of them stranded on the nation's highways, far from home, and comfort,...

What else do you expect, Lewis?

A helicopter appears, a metallic hornet, something slung beneath on a long rope. It swings lazily, precariously - a pallet stacked high with bottled water. It's lowered to the hard shoulder, but no sooner has it touched down there is a mass of people pulling at it. The time for sitting quietly and waiting is over. Now people are taking whatever they think they need.

Even if they do not need it.

Or want it.

Why are we so calm, I wonder, Rebecca and I? Why do we feel apart from this?

To my relief, Rebecca turns away and moves on.

"What would you change then?" she asks.

We have left the bridge and the motorway behind, taken to the cover of the hedgerows. It has begun to rain a little.

"Change?"

"If you could wake back in time, steer a different course."

I recall she's asked me something like this before, that night at Raul's house, among the photo electric twinkle lights. *What would I change?* "I'd make a point of getting to know you sooner."

"You wouldn't go further back then, try to fix your marriage? You must have been happy once."

"I was."

"Then?"

"If I fix my marriage I'll never meet you."

"That's so sweet, Timothy. But you'd never know me, so what's the difference? How can we miss what we've never known."

"But I feel that all the time, don't you? A sweet longing for a thing we've never known. All my life I've felt a longing, Rebecca, an emptiness. But I don't feel it when I'm with you. I don't care how many different ways my life might have turned out, so long as you're in all of them."

She feigns modesty. "Ah but you have such a silver tongue on you."

"There was no more mileage in my marriage, Rebecca. I'm glad I was married, glad for the good years, but I'm glad for being with you too, only like I keep saying, I wish we'd had a little longer together." I pull up my sleeve, thinking to snatch a glimpse at my watch, seeking the date, but of course Rebecca still has it. "Tuesday is it? The ninth? So,... they've predicted the close pass on the seventeenth - same day as Strickland's meeting, which is the Wednesday. Curious coincidence. A week tomorrow. We have to assume that's the day of impact."

"Unless it really is just a close pass and then everything goes back to normal."

"After what we've seen here, there is no normal."

What am I thinking?

I don't know, Lewis. Poor mystic am I. I just ramble on until something vaguely inspired pops out. All I know is a week from now Rebecca and I might be embracing for the last time. I'm wondering what that will feel like.

And what will come afterwards.

For surely the embrace of a priestess must deliver us to somewhere special.

Chapter 45

At a turn in the path, a tractor weary lane cuts in and we come upon an unexpected bounty. There are potatoes lying in the hedgerow where they have spilled from a trailer. I had thought this was entirely sheep country, that the vegetable provinces were further south, but there they are. Rebecca and I fill our pockets. They are small, like a baby's fist, and they have flaking golden skins. We are thinking we might skewer them on saplings for the fun of it, cheer our spirits by roasting them over an open fire.

It begins to rain a little harder, raising a steady pitter patter from the hawthorns. The meadows steam, and in the sprites that rise, to my left, I see a figure, keeping pace - not strictly real but merely liminal, you understand? It's one of my girls, I think. There's another to my right, coming towards us along the path, again on the edge of perception. You might call these ghosts, Lewis, but I do not. She's heavily cloaked, as I remember her from last night's dream. She melts into a thorn hedge, her hand sealed around the hilt of a sword - this latter detail being the last of the image to dissolve. She urges caution, I think, and I find myself braced for something up ahead.

"Tim?"

"Sorry,... seeing fairies all over the place this morning."

"Oh? And are they friendly?"

"Warning us I think. You see nothing?"

"I'm just a dusty old and seriously failed Anglican Vicar, remember? You're the shaman. You're the one who sees things, you fucking looney."

"Try as I might, I find it hard to twist a compliment out of that."

She gives me a cockeyed smile. We shall be joking to the last I think. Even when the asteroid strikes - if it strikes - she will turn to me and say she was expecting something much bigger and more impressive for the end of the world.

A hare takes flight across the meadow, cutting off our banter mid-stream. At first, it comes toward us like a torpedo. Then, sensing our presence, he veers wide, tacking across the meadow, keeping himself equidistant from us and some other threat. I catch a glint of light on blued metal. Then comes a flash of fire, a cannon-jolt splits the air and a divot explodes in the hare's wake. A long

shot, reckless, unskilled.

What?

There are men on the path with guns, Lewis. This is against the law of course, you know? Discharging firearms from a public way. But laws are clearly not what they used to be, even a few short days ago. Well, what are you going to do about it, man? Do I hear the whoop of blades from your spy in the sky come to swoop low and tick them off? Do you dispatch your fluorescent jacketed troll to our aid? No, even now, as the sky falls, he's too busy writing up traffic violations.

There are three of them, each with ammunition belts, making a cross upon their chests. They are like Mexican Bandoleros, but without the hats. They wear thin jackets with jeans and training shoes, and each man is the size of a house, shaven headed, with tattooed forearms, like Popeye.

There is a whiskey bottle in the grass.

No, Lewis, alcohol and guns do *not* mix, especially not in the hands of trolls.

I feel a sinking in my gut.

Yes, tattooed bruisers, as sure as if materialised from my dreams.

Another divot explodes.

Can I take them? There are three, but they're unsteady with drink. I would have to be fast. But who do I think I am suddenly? Bruce Lee?

I hear the staccato fuck-fuck-fuck-fuck-fucking as they converse rather too noisily for a successful hunt. Shit, shit, twat, twat, twatting, cunt,... Fuck,... fuck,... fucking,... hoorah!

I have the 'Droid and am thumb-flicking the map for a track to take us round them, but I already know there are none. Besides, they've seen us, and to evade them now would smack of cowardice, and a life in the classroom has taught me it is always better to outbrave such things, especially those things whose outcomes you are least confident of.

Rebecca feels my fear. "Timothy, we must have more faith than this. England has not already sunk to a violent anarchy. We have more momentum, surely?" I note, however, she pulls down her hood and opens her jacket to reveal the collar. Perhaps she means it like a cross to thrust at these foul mouthed vampires.

I nod my agreement, take a breath, summon my warrior girls, as

if this were no more threatening than a restless dream. I don't know what they can do for us here - I mean in the cold, unyielding light of an ordinary waking reality, but there's no harm in asking, is there?

The path has become a narrow squeeze between barbed wire and a stout hedge. They stand across the way as we approach, three armed and tattooed bruisers with muscled arms to crush life from those less well endowed, and muscled buttocks to ram their phalluses into any orifice they choose. Oh yes, they are superior in this way, in their ability to spread their seed. And if this is to be the future of mankind, I am perhaps better off out of it.

I have no seed to spread, you see?

No point to me at all?

Now,...

Do they not see we wish to pass?

Are they insensible to our presence?

I'm all smiley-confidence, hiding the fear. "Morning gents."

Pathetic!

Well, it works with a fractious class of year sevens, and I'm suspecting there's not much difference in emotional maturity here.

All eyes are on Rebecca - or do I imagine this? She's limping slightly, leaning more heavily on her stick, feigning it a little, for who would want to ravish a lame lady vicar?

"Bagged anything?" she asks, brightly.

They make no reply. Have they not heard us, or do they not understand our language, void of expletives? Can it be they are like naughty boys caught smoking behind the bike shed? I make to squeeze through an imaginary gap, and draw Rebecca into my shadow. I smell whiskey and cigarettes. I feel the heat of the closest man. None seem minded to move, to give way.

I draw up close. We are a heartbeat from conflict now. I have but one more move, one more step. Excuse us, I'll say; they'll make no reply.

And what then, Lewis?

Well,.. *then* the heavens open.

A cloud bursts over our heads sending down a steely sheet of rain. They are shocked into submission, bowled aside by it, as are we. A gap opens big enough for us to pass, without testing anyone's authority, and I take my cue, catching hold of Rebecca's hand to pull her along and out of harm's way.

I'm not opposed to the idea of anarchy, Lewis. I'm sure your analysis is, like mine, that the majority of people will get along just fine, so long as none of us are armed, or drunk. In other words, we are only likely to encounter a successful anarchy in the afterlife, when all of us are already dead and can no longer be harmed.

The rain keeps up its fierce barrage, and a mist sweeps down, engulfs the meadow, puts a distance between us and the armed trolls. Then, as if for good measure, the ground shakes, the sky turns a heavy green and the air is split with a thunderous flash. An old beach tree gives up a branch, flames briefly, then all is silent again except for the angry hiss of rain.

How much of this have I imagined?

I do not stop to ponder it. I do not stop at all, until we recover Rosy.

Rebecca climbs into the driver's seat, but seems less anxious now, taking the time to shake out her coat and toss it into the back, when all I want is to get under way. Then she shakes out her hair and wipes the steam from her spectacles on a tissue. My hands are shaking. I steal a glance in the wing mirror, but it is speckled with rain and I can see nothing through it. Finally, she starts the engine and pulls away.

We do not know if they are following, or if the rain has sent them scurrying for shelter in another direction, nor indeed if our fears, mine in particular, are imaginary. Rebecca catches my eye as we bounce back upon the tarmac and make way. She reads something in me I would rather hide from her.

"You okay, Timbo?"

I fake a smile. "Yes,... silly really."

"What is it?"

"Nothing,... it's just I felt,... I mean back there,... I couldn't have protected you."

"From what? Those dozy muppets? Don't be an ass. They wouldn't have hurt us."

I know she does not believe this. She's only trying to make me feel better. They could quite easily have hurt us. "Oh? You don't think so?"

She feigns surprise. "Of course not." And then: "Anyway, " she says, attempting to draw a line under the whole business, "you would have tried, and I'm grateful. Really, I'm flattered, Tim. Thank you."

"They'll always just take what they want though, won't they?"

"Who?"

"Barbarians. And barbarism is never that far away, is it? We've seen that now."

"We're still here aren't we?"

"When the lightning split that tree,...."

"I know,... curious,... but if that was divine intervention, Timothy, I'm left wondering,..."

“Wondering?”

“What we’ve been spared for."

She checks the mirror. No one is following. I hope it's many days before I sleep again or my dreams will be troublesome after this.

Rebecca relaxes the throttle a little as we come back to the lake road. Boats are tethered in rows by the shore, nodding their heads, still none making way. There is an eeriness, like a world either gone to ground, or trapped on the highways. No one is out for their leisure now, and I fear to see another car, fear that we are not alone, for only if we are alone can there be no threat from the barbaric tendencies of man. The world has fallen, you see? And we are chastened by it. In the world that's coming we need people who can act always from the good, because there will be no laws. And we no longer have it in us, Lewis. The pedantry of the law is useless; it leaves the innocent at the mercy of their fears while the promise of survival comes weighted more in favour of the cunning.

Well, never mind; I can be cunning too.

The wipers beat, the windscreen steams slowly while Rebecca peers ahead through the rain. A car appears suddenly from the pall of weather, heading in the opposite direction, speeding past with a sizzling hiss. We see the lone driver, a man, peering at us as we peer at him, wondering if he be friend or foe, but fearing from now on all must be assumed foes.

Is that right?

How can that be right?

Am I dreaming any of this?

Text me, Lewis, dammit!

But I'm forgetting:

Deadzone.

She almost misses our turn. Rosy rolls alarmingly as she veers sharp and slips though a tunnel of trees like a vixen run to ground. These are twisty back-roads and anyone we encounter here is not

merely passing through. But there is no one. In ten years I have not encountered another vehicle here, and the sense of sanctuary is not disturbed. Rosy throws herself at the incline, strains pitifully, is dropped at once to second gear, then first while she trails a cloud of oily smoke. Then we leave the clouds, burst like a sluggish rocket into an eternal stratospheric blue and the sun paints the day a different hue, restores warmth and colour, and the hope of dreams. The apex of the cabin rises through the trees, welcomes, reassures us that all is well. Meanwhile stormy anvil-heads hug the horizon and process away to the west.

Rebecca pulls up by the tarn, Rosy's brakes squealing dramatically. I step down, cross in a daze to the water, and there I crouch with my head in my hands. I see my face reflected, Rebecca's too as she stands over me, drops her hands to my shoulders, massaging courage. I am still haunted by the presence of the trolls, haunted by my weakness in preventing them from hurting Rebecca, had they chosen to do so. Are all forms of attachment wrong then, Lewis? I know I'm circling here, a moth spiralling in to the flame of revelation. Is it a sin to flinch at the thought of another's pain? A sin to want to avoid it? A sin to want to keep this woman close, and safe?

Of course not.

But only the gods can let go of life when they are in love.

And we are not gods, my friend.

We are only men.

Chapter 46

The radio talks of traffic problems in the North as if they were no more than the perennial Bank Holiday jams. The prediction is that they will ease gradually overnight.

The warhorse MP, besieged by historical accusations of sexual misconduct, remembers the details of his misconduct sufficiently, and resigns. The shuttle of Russian aircraft is not forthcoming; there are arguments about capacity, about airport logistics, about who shall pay for fuel. Pundits toss sour grapes, suggest the promises were empty, that it was, anyway, a mere cynical ploy to weaken confidence in the West and cause economic chaos.

Schipol, Heathrow, Frankfurt, Charles De Gaul,... all are still at breaking point. The European Union issues a statement, urging calm. Our own PM makes a statement repeating the advice of the Astronomer Royal, of NASA, of NOAA: close pass on the 17th; some fragments to break up in the atmosphere; minor impacts are unlikely but cannot be ruled out.

This latter snippet is the only piece of information we did not already know.

Minor impacts cannot be ruled out.

It's passing closer than they thought.

They are preparing us for a strike.

And at the same time transforming even Armageddon into global political capital.

Meanwhile, Rebecca and I are by the tarn again. It's evening now and we have brought rugs to sit upon. We have boiled the potatoes we picked up along the way, and are eating them with tinned Ravioli. Rebecca has been swimming in the late afternoon heat, and now wears only an overlarge teeshirt. The waters of the tarn have warmed in the space of a week to something almost cosy, but I'm not tempted by them this evening. Indeed, I'm deep, bone achingly tired. I feel my body buzzing with something, feel my pulse in every limb, in every meridian.

I am on the cusp of something.

But what?

"You've hardly said a word since we came back, Tim. Is everything okay?"

"Yes,... I'm fine."

"No you're not. Won't you tell me what you're feeling?"

"I'm feeling,... only that I want you, Rebecca."

She blushes. "You've already had me, several times."

"Not like that. You know what I mean. I want to share a life with you. I want to always be with you."

This surprises her. It's as if for the first time she dare think seriously of it. She hides her reaction behind another joke. "But you're so unreliable, Tim. And I'd be a fool to share my life with a man who's been married before. And I'm a vicar, remember? With a peg-leg."

"I thought you wanted to be serious."

"I do, I do. But this isn't like you. You're usually so calm, so composed, so,... elusive. What's happened to you? Surely you're not still thinking about those tattooed trolls we met earlier?"

"In part I am. But I would have thought what's happened to me is obvious."

"Oh?"

"What's happened to me is you, Rebecca."

"Steady,... you'll be filling my head with silly ideas." She thinks for a while. "All right, I like it that you want me, Tim. In fact I'm afraid of how much it means to me. But there's no harm in that, is there?"

"In you liking it, or me wanting you?"

"Both. You make it sound like finding love and companionship in middle age is a disease or something."

I manage a smile, teasing, a defence against the way she holds her body now, proud and breast-juttingly provocative. She does this on purpose, having found out quickly how much this pose arouses me.

"Whenever there's want, there's also suffering," I remind her.

"Oh, don't be such a sober stiff-ass. You won't be suffering in a minute when I'm dragging your pants off and making love to you." She raises her eyebrows suggestively. "I've noticed how much you like it in the Roman Way."

"On the contrary; I shall suffer terribly."

"Oh?"

"Because at some point you'll stop, and I won't want you to."

"Yes you will, you go all weak when you come, and beg me to stop. So I stop and then you beg me for more."

Is it because there's so little time we have accelerated our

relationship to this level so soon? We were strangers a week ago. Now we are such intimates, and as trusting with each other as children.

"You're wrong," I tell her.

"No, I'm not."

"I mean what you said once about me being unable to be married to a vicar."

"Oh? This is news,... can I call that a back-handed proposal of marriage then?"

"Call it what you like. You be what you want, you be whatever you need to be in order to be yourself; teacher, dancer, priestess. I still want us to be together. For ever."

"You're only saying that now because you know I can never hold you to it. I mean,... even if I wanted to that is."

"Why not?"

"Because we'll both be dead in a week, *dummy*! There's no more mileage in *for ever*."

"Oh,... I was forgetting that. But,... suppose it doesn't happen, would you,... want to? Hypothetically speaking?"

"Marry you, you pillock? Well, let me imagine it for a moment. Exchanging knowing glances in Strickland's meetings, and in the dusty corridors. Then go home to our cosy nest and make love, and at the weekends come here. Oooh! The vicar and the shaman?" She's smiling, making wobbly eyes at me. I'll get no sense out of her now. She's thinking only of sex, her fingers walking purposefully up my leg. "I can see it would be fun," she concedes.

"Except you'll have church on Sundays."

She frowns. "Oh,... I was forgetting that."

"And you'd be married to your parish."

"Ah, here we go again: the jealous Timothy. *I like it*."

"So you'd be wherever you are, and,..."

"And?"

"I'd have to come visit. Or just move into your vicarage or something."

"Well, we'd have to be married first. My Bishop would never approve of my cohabiting."

"Okay."

"Settled then. I'll marry you, if only for the convenience and the subterfuge."

"Subterfuge?"

“The covering of our depravity in the eyes of the Bishop, and my stuck up parishioners.”

We laugh. But we are not entirely joking.

Yet for all of this I know it’s foolish to invest one's hopes in another human being. It was Miranda who taught me that - that to expect another human being to make you happy is a mistake: inevitably disappointing for one partner, and draining for the other. I don't want it to be that way with Rebecca. I want simply to be with her because in being with her I find I am happier than I am without her.

There is, I think, a difference in that.

But does this means happiness too is suffering?

And anyway what is happiness?

Hell, I'm just going round in circles here. Why do all my threads of thought these days tie themselves into knots of nonsensical paradox? I know they should mean something, but I can't work them out. And they are piling up just as the time for solving them is running out.

I need to sleep.

But fear to dream.

She sits astride, peels off her teeshirt and begins to rotate her hips. Arms raised, she lifts her hair, lets it fall, and with it falls my need for workings out. There's something very sensual about her this evening - not simply feeling me beneath her but feeling the whole of the universe upon her skin - the late sun, and first caress of dusky velvet. I watch her ride it, something powerful in the depth of her assurances, so she does not have to dig desperately for it, but can take it at a long leisurely pace, one slice at a time.

Then she's laughing. "Stop it, Tim."

"What?"

"I have dreamed with you. You must know by now I can read your mind."

She is all heat and flesh, and melting into a pool of warm wetness in my lap. And somewhere in the middle of her am I. And I am an ache, growing by degrees until I feel myself afloat in air.

"You fear its loss," she says. "You fear we shall grow old and cold. But that is not our fate. This freshness, this joy, this newness,... it shall always be ours. *Always*. Don't you see?"

It's true, Lewis. But how can I not fear its loss, exactly the way she describes? For in the depth of Rebecca my life is raised now,

and for the first time, to the fullness of its potential. Yet how can it be anything more than fancy, when this simple act between us changes nothing?

And we have only days left to live?

Chapter 47

Is it Wednesday? I think it must be by now, but you know how it is? Sometimes we slip out of reality and wake into the dream, and then confuse the two. Except I know this is the dreaming before even I open my eyes. I can smell her, you see?

No, not Rebecca.

Emma!

And Emma does not smell like Rebecca.

Emma is not Chanel – she predates Chanel by half a century of course. She is instead a sweetness, and a depth and a mystery too, with just a hint of lemon sharpness, but crucially, I think, nothing of a more bitter nature. She means me well, I'm sure, but for all of her apparent prowess, I am reminded she is as much of an explorer here as me, both of us with our esoteric maps and guides, seeking to know the lay of the after-lands. The difference between us, the dream assures me, is she is far more advanced than me by dint of effort over several lifetimes.

Lady Emma Louise Hollander is what the Hindus might call an old soul.

All right, Lewis - be thinking on that for a while, but first things first:

Where am I?

I'm lying in a large bed, soft sheets, goose-down pillows. How do I know they are goose-down? I make them so, of course. This is the dreaming, remember? The room is yellow - no - it is golden; a combination of the wallpaper, and the sun streaming through gauze curtains, and the curtains float in a life-giving breeze. I smell the sea and of course, like I just told you, I smell Emma.

A golden chamber!

I'm sorry if this shocks you. After all I was, but a few moments ago, in thrall to Rebecca as she worked her carnal magic upon me. And now, presumably in the depths of post-coital slumber, perhaps still glued to Rebecca's breast, I am waking in the boudoir of another woman for whom I feel a different kind of desire. But a man does not have any control over these things. If I understood them any better I might have shied away from such an encounter right now but as it is, I must take events as I find them.

She is sitting at an escritoire, by the windows where the light is

better. I see her long hair brushed out over her shoulders, and shining like a golden fleece. Gold again, you see? Something meaningful in this, I think! Something alchemical. Has she always been blonde? I don't know Lewis. In truth I cannot remember now.

She's wearing a shawl over an ivory cotton nightdress, and a hollow in the bed beside me betrays her recent rising from it. I explore it with my palm; it's cool - she's been writing for some time then. I see papers, I see a notebook, and I hear the scratching of her pen.

At first she's oblivious to my intrusion, then feels a presence, shivers, draws the shawl a little higher around her neck, then turns and gives a satisfying start.

"Timothy?"

"I don't know,... am I?"

"Well of course you are? Who else would you be?"

"I don't know - your husband perhaps?"

"Don't be silly, I come here to get out of his way. He'd never have the imagination to follow me here."

"Then how did *I* manage it?"

"You have a key to my dreams, as I have a key to yours. We can find each other anywhere. We have only to think of it. So,... why are you thinking of me?"

"I was thinking of Rebecca, actually."

She feigns a look of pique. "Well, I presume she'll be around somewhere. You must go and look for her. Really! And there I was thinking it was me you'd come to see!"

"Where is *here*, exactly?"

"The Belvedere hotel."

This tells me nothing. "But *where*? And just as important: *when*?"

"I don't know where exactly. We're on the Adriatic coast, approximately, with a little bit of Bridlington thrown in. I wasn't very specific in terms of geography when I constructed it, not that geography has any meaning here, as you well know. I think you understand very well how these things work by now, Timothy. As for when, it could be any time between1860 and 1890, I suppose, though again, we're talking in purely conceptual terms. In the fullness of reality, we are sideways in time, and nowhere in particular. You're very welcome of course, especially as I find you in my bed."

"You're dreaming?"

"I hope so. If I'm not it means I'm dead, which is a little before my time if I'm recalling my current time-line correctly, though these things are necessarily a little confused from the perspective of the dreamscape - time-lines, I mean - I'm switching about from one to the next, which isn't a good idea, nor a skill I'm essentially ready to exploit just yet, but what else can one do but follow one's nose?"

I check to make sure I'm dressed, before sliding from bed, then pull on a robe and slippers for extra security. Then I move to the window. The curtains hide a balcony which looks out upon an azure sea. White buildings, biblical in appearance, are clustered together into a small town, below, shimmering in the heat. There is something of the mirage about it all, or a painting, and not quite real.

I laugh.

"Something amuses you, Timothy?"

"I was thinking it doesn't seem quite real, but then obviously it's not, is it?"

"Like anything else here, it's as real as I need it to be."

"What are you writing?"

"A secret," she says.

"But are all writings here not a waste of time? Next time you come here, they'll have gone, and we can't take them with us. Look away for a moment and the page will be blank."

"Ah, but thoughts are so much clearer in the dreaming, Timothy. Have you not noticed? And what we write here influences our thoughts in the waking world,... and thereby our more material writings."

"I'd not thought of that."

"Well think on it now."

"I shall. And will you tell it, this secret?"

"I dare say it's already been told a thousand times, yet it’s safe enough in plain view."

"Why?"

"Because no one will believe it. It is the best way to hide a secret."

There's a couch on the balcony, I ease myself onto it. Emma remains at the escritoire, the thin curtains between us lending us the appearance of ghosts to one another. I ask her: "Can you be more specific about what year this is for you? I mean what year you're dreaming it from?"

She thinks for a moment, presses her fingers to her temples, as if it's a real effort to recall. "Eighteen seventy, something,... three, I think. Or maybe four. Does it matter?"

"It's just that you once told me you died of fever in Bombay around eighteen sixty four."

"I did? Wait,... yes I did! But that was then, Timothy, which clearly isn't now. You mustn't confuse these things."

"It might be clear to you, Emma, but not to me. To me this is all very confusing."

"That's because you're still thinking in three dimensions, my love."

Ah,...

Space-time, Lewis; we've encountered this before, haven't we? I don't suppose one can avoid it in any meaningful discussion of the dreaming. But is it really worth getting into this with you when my own understanding is so infantile? Perhaps Emma will explain it for us.

"Three dimensions are plenty for me," I tell her, thinking to open with a joke.

"Not any more they're not," she replies. "That's why you're so confused. But you *are* getting warmer."

"I don't think an appreciation of further dimensions would help either me or Lewis right now. But, for the sake of argument, how many dimensions are there? Lewis, can always pass the information on to the analysts. They might have a better idea of these things, unless they think I'm just mad, which is quite possible. In which case, like your secret, even though it's out in the open, no one will believe it."

As I speak she's looking away, distracted, so I'm not even sure she's listening. She's counting on her fingers. At first I think she is counting out the number of dimensions of space-time, and she goes on for so long I'm beginning to worry, but in fact she's calculating her age - or at least the current manifestation of it. She looks up, surprised: "But that makes me at least forty four," she says. "That's positively ancient, and quite an improvement on past performance." She beams. "There's hope for me yet, Timothy! I should dearly like to find a line in time that takes me to old age."

"But what advantage is it to live to an old age? I mean, what difference does it make if we die old or young?"

I'm aware my tone is that of someone who believes he is denied

this luxury.

"Well, obviously, the longer we spend on any particular branch in time," she says, "the more chance we have of working things out, and of perfecting our lives."

I don't understand this at all. "Ah,... of course. Stupid of me."

"Timothy, do I detect sarcasm in your tone?"

"Possibly,"

"It's most unbecoming for one of your profession."

"Teacher? All teachers are sarcastic – we practise in front of the mirror. The county offers course on it."

"Not 'teacher', silly. I mean 'shaman'."

I cringe. "Hate that word."

"Mystic then."

"Better. Sorry." I need to change the subject here: "And your husband? What does he do now? Are you still in Bombay?"

"No. He's,... well,... something at the foreign office. Yes,... I'm living in London at the moment, as well as the north. But London's such a filthy place. We have a house near Penrith. I think we might have met there recently, you and I? We spend the Summers in the Lakes. It's so easy by train, now, you know? Don't you think they're magical? Trains I mean. Quite the wonder of the age. A comfortable drawing room you enter in one part of the country, and exit in another. Though I suppose our technology seems quite primitive compared with what you must have by now."

"I wouldn't count on it. I suppose there was once a golden age of railways, but I assure you the novelty wears off very quickly. And your bungalow?"

"In Karachi? I've not seen it in many a year, not in reality at least. You can still find another version of me there in the dreaming if you'd like a tour of it. We were recalled, you see? Back to England."

"Better than dying of typhoid in Bombay."

"Really? Yes,... quite,.... I suppose that's what happened. Is that what I said? Well, obviously this time around neither of us caught it, so we had the chance of being recalled. Amazing isn't it? We have a little house in the Eden Valley, near Lazonby - do you know it?"

Yes, I know Lazonby.

As I look at Emma it dawns on me that I do not see in her a single life now. She has never been the same thing twice, always

shifting, as if morphing among the various possibilities her time has to offer. I used to think this was on account of a suspicious evasiveness - if not downright lying - but suddenly I realise I am seeing her past, her future, and all the probabilities in between, as no doubt she sees all of mine. Yet of the two of us, I am alone in manifesting my awareness from a single probability, from the space time-trap of the inevitability of my own one life, a life that will likely soon end under several gigatonnes of interstellar iron.

Enough, Timothy. "So,... how many."

"How many what, darling?"

"Dimensions of space-time."

"Oh, heavens, I don't know. Six will do it - talking metaphysically of course. Scientifically, I haven't a clue. There may be one more, making it seven, again in metaphysical terms, but I'm not sure about that, and for all practical purposes, six is fine. Six works. Six explains what I've seen at least."

"Three of space and three of time?"

"Yes, of course. It's what I'm writing about, actually. You think it too fanciful?"

"On the contrary, I'm sure there's much in what you say. You haven't been wrong yet."

She blushes. "Oh, you old rogue, Timothy. You'll say anything to get a woman in to bed."

You think I'm joking, Lewis?

No, listen it's obvious, or at least it is as I'm dreaming it; when I wake of course it will be a different story and likely as clear as mud, but for now let me test my understanding with you:

Time one, we lead the single possibility of a life. This is the ordinary time-bound existence with which we are all familiar.

Time two, we lead any number of possible lives, but from the perspective of our time-line in time one, all other lives are hidden.

Time three, I gain a higher perspective. In time three, I view my life in the context of all the others. I see the outcomes of all that is possible for me. Time three is the perspective of the watcher of my thoughts, and the architect of my dreams, and he cannot perish as I shall perish at the end of all my lines in time.

So, there we have it, three of space and three of time - at least in so far as we understand the nature of time, and I realise in times two and three, that concept becomes rather fuzzy, at least from the perspective of time one.

But I've confused you enough.

For now just hold to the possibility of many lives, Lewis - a sort of recurrence, each starting from the same seed, but evolving in various ways, depending on chance, conditioning, and the lessons you have learned from other lives bleeding through into your unconscious mind. Do not dwell on this, or worry about it. Just let it dissolve the calcified thinking that holds you firmly in the world of one dimensional time. I'll colour the details in a little more later on, if I can remember them, that is.

And think also on this: there is something higher than the watcher of our thoughts, higher even than you, Lewis. I have often felt it. And so have you in your rare mystical moments.

At least it's so in *my* cosmology.

But listen, even starting with a clean slate, not *everything* is possible for my life. I suspect I am, alas, not married anywhere, to Rita Hayworth. I suspect now we must move within our own generation, not drift into others. So I will never be born into Emma's time, nor she into mine. But Rebecca? Yes,... the entangling of our times is already proven, and raises a curious resonance of memory now. The watcher of my thoughts approves. She is a good move for me, one worth repeating, time after time.

I trust.

She's there all right, as here am I, with Emma. But gaining this perspective, I really ought to be able to look ahead, as well as back. I really ought to be able to see the flat-lining of all my time lines, about a week from now, see it coming, like I have seen it coming in dreams before.

Emma is smiling as she reads my thoughts and sees my conclusion before I have realised it myself.

And what is that conclusion? Well, I'm wondering if it's possible to jump time lines from the dreaming, if I could for example attain a *time-three* perspective, then read the probabilities of all those futures in which I reach a ripe old age, and pick the best one. It would be like reading a favourite old novel over and over.

How to escape an asteroid impact, Lewis?

Jump time-lines!

Emma’s eyes light up in approval. "Oh," she says. "Now, that's a much bigger game to play, and you're closer to the truth than you think."

Is that it?

I was only playing thought-games, but Emma is suggesting it's a possibility. Suddenly everything about her makes sense:

"You've done it, haven't you? You do it from here, from the dreaming. All the time. You wake back and forth, choose any opening from any time you've ever slept. In some times you die of fever in Bombay, in others you've found a way beyond it, a way that leads you back to England, to London, and Penrith. Rebecca was joking about this, but this is what you actually *do*! This is why you're *special*. You travel in time. Your *own* time. That's why you shape-shift so much - at least from my perspective. You're realising all the possibilities of a life in form. Our existence doesn't comprise the one life. It comprises many. Dozens. Thousands. Or maybe the potential is infinite,... it depends how we develop, how we change,..."

My God, Lewis, this is staggering! I feel dizzy as I contemplate it, drop my head into my hands, fearing to waken and lose this precious insight.

She smiles mysteriously. "Heavens,... you make it all sound so complicated, Timothy. And I'm sure it's quite beyond me, really."

Now she's being disingenuous.

"No. You've written about this, Emma. I've read it. It may even be what you're writing now."

She shakes her head, smiles again, evasive this time. She plays a game, leads me on by denial, by teasing, by flirting. "Really Timothy, it's perhaps better if you don't think any more about it."

Now she fencing with me! She's done this before, saying what we should not do, knowing full well I shall eventually do it, like how we should not share experiences of mutual lucid dreaming. And I can't help thinking on it now, because if I'm not supposed to be thinking about it, why am I here with her, and why is she talking about it, and why, if you'll forgive me for stating the obvious, am I,... even *thinking* about it?

But when I do think about it, all thoughts add up to the same future for me, and it's not encouraging.

"Why have I no memories of ever waking back from my future? Is that because I have no future?"

She feigns impatience. "Oh, this again! Darling, our consciousness is like a slice of the whole. All we see is what is "now". All we remember are those events behind us. Future events remain hidden, not because we have not experienced a future, but

because this is how memory in our familiar space-time works. Dream back to yourself in your twenties, and you might retain sufficient information of a possible future life in your thirties, a conglomeration of lives that you might already have lived, and which could also therefore be partially realised again. But the further back you dream, the less of a possibility your present life becomes, do you see?"

"And the asteroid will still strike, because that's a probability beyond anyone's control."

"It might. But worse, if you try to escape the asteroid by waking back, say twenty years, the chances of you meeting Rebecca would become, sadly, a remote possibility. Would you really want to take that risk?"

Am I imagining this, Lewis?

No,.. don't answer that, I know I'm *imagining* it. Worse: *I am dreaming it*!

But Emma is hinting at a way out, *that I can wake back to any point in my life*.

If I go far enough back I might avoid a world of global warming, and the war on terror. I might be lucky and avoid a timeline in the early decades of the twenty first century which coincides with Farenheit 911, the middle eastern wars, and an asteroid strike, but I will never know Rebecca, nor Miranda for that matter. I might even wind up with children, and a job that does not involve teaching, but mostly,....

I will never know Rebecca.

Okay, listen to this, Lewis, my sneak thieving friend. This is the most important piece of intelligence you'll ever fish from the sewers of your machinery:

I have solved the question of what happens when the earth is annihilated: *it doesn't fucking matte*r.

There are many earths, an infinity of them, and so many versions of our lives, the loss of one is neither here nor there, and we probably won't even notice. And if we want out, we can always switch horses mid-stream, any time we like.

But would we really want to?

Emma is nodding at the run of my thoughts. "In any given situation," she says, "our lives tend to follow the most probable course. At least this is what I have observed. Not all things are possible for us, but of what *is* possible at any point in time, that is

where you will find your attention drawn, to the point at which your present and your future meet, the point of your own present, and your own *presence*."

"Then Rebecca and I weren't drawn by fate?"

"It is chance that draws us together, Timothy. Love that binds."

"But if we've loved in the future,... a future in which the asteroid misses, or does not exist, might that memory not be drawing us back together?"

She smiles,... "Ah,... now you're starting to play that bigger game again. Isn't it exciting? My, how much more alive the universe feels when we think along such lines. But my advice Timothy, is not to risk what you are thinking. The jumping of time-lines is very much a question of chance. It can be done. I know because I have done it, but the chances are one's life will not be so very different, held as we are in the area of greatest probability. You're familiar with Gaussian probability? To bring about a significantly different outcome for ourselves we must chance upon the tail ends of the curve, and there-in lie the extremes. Go back a week, and things may not turn out very different at all, but go back ten years, or twenty, and we might stand a better chance of dramatic change - yes even of avoiding an asteroid strike - but again, I warn you: we might also lose Rebecca."

"How can I lose her?"

"By never meeting her in the first place. To find a time-line in which the earth is spared, you would know a very different life my love. But listen, so, the asteroid strikes; it doesn't matter. It has already struck a million times, and made not one jot of difference to anything. Well has it? You know this,... you must be realising now: *it makes no difference*."

"It's what you're writing now, isn't it? I've heard this before - read it in your journal. How to wake back into a different part of our lives. How to switch time-lines. How not to die. Ever. It's true. You've worked it out."

"We all die, Timothy. It's unavoidable, but so many of us go through life with such a bleak notion of what death is. It is as important a part of life as birth, and just as unavoidable. And we shall understand neither so long as we remain mired in our three dimensional, time-one thinking. Would you like to see what I'm writing?"

"I've already seen it, haven't I? It's that encrypted bit at the back

of your journal. Why am I dreaming of this? Why encrypt it?"

"It's just a little tease of mine. Listen, it's true, you can probably save your life by switching the focus of your attention, in the dreaming, to a time line in which the asteroid does not strike. But in doing so, you will sacrifice every detail of your life as far back as the branch of probability from which you take another course. You will not know this life any more. You may remember it, but those memories will fade, as surely as if you had dreamed that other life.

"But by holding fast to this course, holding fast to this love, you might indeed increase the probability that across all time lines, Rebecca and you are bound to meet, drawn by the echo of this one past love, a past that is still your future - all be it a future of a very few days now. But be assured, that somewhere and some-when, you will have a broad horizon opening, instead of narrowing, one in which you can both grow.

"There now,... can you not see it quite so much as a curse, Timothy, and more of a blessing, that you have so little time? Surely now, more than ever, you are beginning to sense the enormity of life, its true depth, its ever-present hints of meaning beyond anything any of us can fully know. What greater test of love than to hold hands and see the end coming, together? What more certain guarantee, after such a sacrifice, that you will be bound to meet again?"

"But if all that's true, why are you hinting at a way out?"

"All of life is about choices, Timothy. By some we grow, by others we do not. Shall I tell it to you? Shall I reveal the key?"

"I've already seen it. It means nothing. It's indecipherable. Rebecca thought it might be a line from a poem. I told her it could be anything. I told her that you are a puzzle, an enigma and that nothing would surprise me."

"You flatter me. It is not a line from a poem, though in its simplicity it is itself poetic. Shall I tell it? Shall I decipher it for you?"

"Save myself and lose the life I have? Or lose my life and guarantee a future life with Rebecca? Interesting choice, Emma."

"And if I'm not mistaken, Timothy I think you have already made it."

Chapter 48

I wake by the tarn, small hours late. There are candles and oil-lanterns to prick the velvet night, and stars, and just the thinnest sliver of a moon as she comes out of the dark. I smell something of a lemony nature, and wonder if perhaps my awakening is false, that Emma is still with me, teasing me with a shift of scene. But the scent is from Citronella sticks which raise lazy sprites into the night air and keep the midges at bay. Moths wander dizzily. I have a pillow and blankets, and the feeling is one of warmth, of laziness, and of a different kind of magic.

Rebecca wears a thick sweater over the tee-shirt, and a blanket across her shoulders. Her spectacles are pulled down to the end of her nose as she studies a loose-leafed notepad by the light of a lamp. She taps a pen against her teeth, deep in thought. The night is warm.

"We've just made love, and now you're marking essays? Teaching's obviously your most natural calling."

She looks up. "Oh? Awake are we? I told you, you always pass out big-time when you come. Really, I thought you were dead! Man slain by sexual frenzy, was your headline. But what a way to go, eh?" She winks cheekily.

The night oozes love.

I remember now the slow, silken rising of what she had ridden out of me, and the passing into blackness. Hardly a frenzy. Middle age, Lewis. It has its sweeter side, such as this, but there are times when I long for the raging bull energy I once enjoyed with thoughts of sex. But at least now I understand why I had not woken in the dream to find Rebecca waiting for me: she had not slept; instead, she had arranged a nest for us, and lit candles.

"Anyway, I am not marking essays," she says. "I'm trying to solve Emma's cipher."

Of course she is. My dream has at least half-predicted this. But why am I suppressing a sudden alarm at the prospect?

What was Emma telling me about that cipher, Lewis?

Wait, I remember!

It is the key to waking up from one's dream into a different version of one's life.

Hmm,...

How real does that sound to you in the cold light of day?

Not very?

Me neither. For all of its compelling authenticity in the dreaming, it sounds ridiculous now, doesn't it? And to cover the key in a Sunday Supplement word-puzzle? How can we take any of this seriously?

I don't know my friend, but I think we must try,...

And why?

Because I fear it. Fear is resistance, and we must learn to let go of it.

And I remember Emma said the best place to hide a secret is in plain sight, that the best way to keep a secret is to tell it, because some secrets no one will believe.

"Any luck?" I ask.

"Nope. Seven blocks of seven letters. It should be obvious, but I can't seem to get at it. Maybe tomorrow when I'm not seeing double."

"Seven dimensions."

"What?"

"Might not exist though. Emma wasn't sure about it, I mean the seventh dimension. Personally though, I think there must be. In fact, I'm sure of it. It's the only thing that makes sense."

"About the only think making sense to me at the moment, is the fact you're not making any sense at all. Strange dream, by any chance?"

"You could say that."

"Want to talk about it?"

We can probably avoid what's coming Rebecca. We can change time-lines in the dreaming. The key to it is what you're puzzling over now. But it will be as if we had not met. And there will be little memory of it in the greater dimensions of our lives; there will be insufficient gravity as it were. And we might never meet again in the fullness and all the dimensions of our lives,... in time.

"I need to think about it first, " I tell her. "It barely makes sense to me." My mouth feels dry. "Could do with a drink, actually."

She gives me a twinkle and raises a large glass of red wine. She's a bottle gone already.

"I was thinking more of a cup of tea, actually."

"Then go and make it yourself. I've been sitting here so long my bum's gone to sleep." She tosses the pad aside and snuggles down

under the covers, holds me, takes possession of me, lays her head upon the pillow beside me, kisses me, lifts her shoulders in contentment and sighs. "Oh, Tim. Can there be anything more perfect than this? Just look at the stars. They're so clear - I can even see the milky way."

"Anything more perfect? No,... but a cup of tea might come close."

She replies with a tap to my arm. "Shut up." And then: "Tim?"

"Hmm?"

"Have you given any thought to how you'd like us to see things out?"

"See things out? Oh you mean the end of the world? Not really. I think I'm still playing see-saw with it. One half of me insisting it won't happen, the other insisting it will. But I suppose we should think about it. What about you? What would you like to do."

"I don't want to hide from it - that would be silly. But I'd like to be comfortable. Maybe if the weather's fine, we could sit out here. If it's night, we could be like this, cosy under a rug, under the stars, with candles."

"I'd like that. It sounds perfect."

"Really?" She sighs. "Then that's what we'll do. And we'll hold hands."

But how can anyone be content in this?

"Strange how we go on, isn't it?" she says. "I mean, there's old Mr Whittaker, learning Spanish so he can read Cervantes in the original Spanish. He looked well enough, and such a lovely man, but he must take every summer now as a bonus. And then there's me, puzzling over this damned cipher, as if it makes any difference to anything, and I can take the knowledge with me into the dreaming."

I can't keep this to myself, Lewis. I have to tell her, at least in so far as I understand it myself.

"But what if it *is* important, Rebecca? What if that cipher contains a spell of words that we can utter, and magic ourselves away from here, into another life?"

She laughs. "Well, if it's that important I'd better get back to it." Then she lies still for a moment, grows serious. "Is this something to do with what you were dreaming about?"

"I was with Emma. She was writing that last bit of the journal."

"She told you what the puzzle was? Can you remember it?"

"She offered to tell me, but before I could decide if I wanted to

know or not, I woke up."

"Well, that was unfortunate, and I suppose I'll just have to forgive you for seeking Emma out while instantly forgetting the best sex you've ever had in your life. That's the difference between me and your wife. I'm reconciled to you having another woman from the outset."

"I didn't actually seek her. I just woke up and there she was."

Note, Lewis, I do not elaborate to the extent of admitting I woke up in Emma's bed, though such distinctions now seem trivial. Rebecca sounds magnanimous, but no woman can be *that* magnanimous.

"It's curious," I tell her, "I mean, this idea of hers. Have you noticed how she's leading us away from thinking of the dreaming as a final destination, more as a nexus with a multitude of entry points and exits, back into ordinary waking reality?"

Rebecca nods sleepily, and snuggles closer.

"I've been thinking about it," I tell her. "Emma's suggesting the entry points are when we sleep, the exits when we wake. But what if we're not as confined as we think we are; what if we can wake back to any point in our life - and I mean really wake up - even start a new thread, a new time-line from there. We don't just have the one life - we have many lives, where every possibility is explored. The thread we were following before doesn't end - it goes on the same. We're just no longer aware of it, or of the people we were with, or indeed of the person we were ourselves at that point. Only the watcher of our thoughts is aware of that bigger picture, only the watcher of our thoughts gets to make sense of the whole thing,... Rebecca,... Rebecca?"

I hear a gentle purring now. She's drifted off to sleep. I don't know how much she heard, nor how much she'll remember when she wakes, and I realise for a while I was simply talking to myself anyway.

It puzzles me, Lewis, this idea of the focus of our attention, for presumably even if a part of me shifts the focus of attention to another life, and thereby escapes an asteroid strike, I shall still be aware in this life too, right up to the end. But what part of me? How can I have an infinite number of rapt attentions spans, all focused down upon their own infinitesimal slice of "now"?

The idea veers towards nonsense.

But not quite.

Gently, I peel aside the blanket and leave her to sleep, trusting she'll be okay in the dreaming alone for once. Then, easing myself into the tarn, I slide its silken warmth over my skin, and begin to swim. The night is becoming transparent now, a hint of dawn's amber behind the black mountain, the fainter stars winking out. I glance back from time to time at the priestess as she sleeps, cocooned in the animated light of the candles dotted around her. Shadows flicker, lending the illusion of a world in motion, while she rests in perfect stillness.

Not many nights like this remain.

If at the ending of my life, perhaps as soon as next week, I can be assured of waking back into some other thread of my life, then it makes no sense to quit this one, to think of escaping, for a part of me shall be here until the end anyway, and it would be a cowardly thing to do, to slip away, when I could be bearing witness to the most momentous event ever to befall mankind. I wonder about the journal now, wonder if I should tear out that last page, for indeed I do not want to know the answer to Emma's riddle, and I don't want Rebecca to solve it, for if it does reveal a simple charm of words, or a special yoga to facilitate the shifting of my self across time lines, then might I not be tempted to try it?

And if I did, and it worked, what part of me would remain to keep faith with the priestess?

Here.

And *now*.

I swim back and climb out, dripping water over Rebecca's pad as I read her doodles. The journal is there too, and I flick to the last of Emma's notes, wondering at the strange blend of dream and reality my life has now become. None of this is real, Lewis, in the ordinary sense at least. In the ordinary sense I am projecting a universe of dreams from the journal of a Victorian gentlewoman, gifted to me by an old man whose life was spent in the collection of words.

But that does not make any of it untrue.

Our life moves in time, a straight line we imagine, but in the dreaming we have full cognizance of it from birth to death. Then life becomes a plane as everything we've done can be changed, for good or ill. From another perspective we see this, when we become the observer of our thoughts, raised still one dimension higher. At any moment we can be engaged anywhere in an infinity of possibility, an infinity of lines through time, for all time. In this way are we eternal beings, sculptors of

our own multi-dimensional form. And the only thing holding us on a particular course are the memories of the life we've already led up to now, and the belief things can be no other way.

But such shackles are shed each night in sleep, and need not be replaced.

The dreaming is a house of many doors.

Many mansions.

ERDEHTF-ANEWPMO-MEEWFUT-AEWXIJI-SDOULDK-WONLYAS-EDREAMX

Do you have it, Lewis? I'm sure it's very simple, only I was never any good with puzzles. I realise the first of the seven blocks looks hopeful when read backwards, yielding a lone connective: THE. This might be a clue to something else, so I pick up Rebecca's pen and am unable to prevent myself making exploratory doodles of my own. I feel the puzzle drawing me in, but then note Rebecca has uncovered these same insights, yet taken them no further. I presume they are dead ends then, like so many of our speculations in this realm. And I remind myself I do not want to know the answer, because what the puzzle conceals, I'm sure, is true, and if I knew that secret, I would not have the courage to resist escaping by it.

What harm in that, you ask, Lewis?

Well, none except I know the right thing, the only thing to do that makes any sense, is to look my end calmly in the eye.

To see things out.

I wonder about tossing the journal in the tarn, but set it back down upon the rug. It still feels precious to me; inscrutable, tantalising, and now a little dangerous; and I realise I would not like to part this life without it being numbered among my possessions. I cannot take it with me of course, but still, there is a romance to it.

Strange thought: *Romance.*

And all romantic notions burn themselves out in lust.

None of this makes sense to you, does it?

Me neither.

I dress, repair briefly to the cabin and make tea, then return with my cup and saucer to watch over Rebecca as the dawn gains momentum. Are there six sunrises now, or seven to go? I feel her stillness as she sleeps, feel it in my bones, sitting there, lotus fashion. I feel it as a deep vibration, a resonance excited by love.

Sometimes then, I am the man, sometimes the mountain, phasing in and out until we become perfectly interchangeable concepts, and the sense of a loving dimension to the world widens to infinity. Love is the energy underlying all things, the one guiding resonance. But not just any love. This is the "letting go" kind of love, not the "hanging on". It comes from God. Rebecca is right in holding to the articles of her faith. It *is* God.

And more, Lewis, what does not excite it, can safely be ignored.

Because it is corrupt.

The first warm rays bring the butterflies and damselflies. A blue admiral sets down briefly on Rebecca's brow. Gently, I waft it away, but am too slow to prevent its gossamer kiss from waking her. She draws breath deeply, suddenly, as if she has plumbed depths that are sparse in oxygen.

"It's easy," she says. "The puzzle. It came to me,... Listen, all we have to do is,..."

I touch my finger to her lips. "Let that be the one secret between us, Rebecca."

"But, Tim,..."

"I don't want to know it."

Puzzled by my denial, she struggles for her pad, takes up a pen and begins to make furious rearrangements of the letters. Her curiosity has not yet been overtaken by the implications, that this may be the first time we have met, in time, and that in revealing an escape, it could well be our last.

She looks up from the pad as the letters come out, I presume, as she has expected them to. Her expression is one of satisfaction, tempered by a dawning realisation. This surprises you, Lewis? It's simply how dreams work sometimes.

"Fuck," she says. "It's so simple? Can it really be that simple?"

Now, I think, she sees it, and at once questions it: "What?" she says, and then, as the realisation dawns properly, she defends herself by dismissing it: "It's probably rubbish, anyway." But I detect more hope in her tone than conviction. She knows the counsel of Emma's journal has not failed us yet. Why then should this last and more closely guarded revelation, not also be true?

What was it she said as she made love to me? *"You fear we shall grow old and cold. But that is not our fate. This freshness, this joy, this newness,... it shall always be ours. Always. Don't you see?"*

But knowing a way out now, as I presume she does, how can she

not be tempted to use it? Especially as I would never know the difference? We might sit hand in hand, here by the tarn on the evening of that final fall of night, and already, unconsciously, she might have dreamed back to another part of her life in which she has become more vitally aware. She might be twenty five again and at the peak of her prowess as a dancer, or she might be entering the seminary with more of an eye on a parish next time.

And I would never know it!

I can see, as she draws the blankets about her now, that she is thinking about it. Carefully she tears out the page from her note-pad, tears from that a square containing the little solution of Emma's puzzle, and she slides it between the pages of the journal. She sets it down, gives me a look, then shuffles inside. In this she intends perhaps restoring a kind of balance, giving me the chance to steal a look at the solution, then we might be equals in this revelation. And in the future, when we hold hands, she will wonder if I am thinking of it, as I will wonder if she thinks the same. And we will both be wondering if the other has acted upon it, that if in any truly vital sense, either of us are still really there any more.

Strange thoughts, Lewis.

How can we not be there, if we are plainly there already?

I had not expected this.

Even before the asteroid strikes, reality is falling apart before my eyes.

I take up the journal, turn it in my hands for a while, considering the options, then bind it firmly shut with a piece of twine. Jumping time-lines is a step too far for me, even if my life - this life - depends upon it. Maybe if my soul were as old as Emma's I might be up to it, but I've a feeling I've not been that many times around the clock, and that my place is to simply see things out as far as they go in this single line of time.

But if that's so, why would the knowledge come to me?

Why would Emma tempt me with it?

Why grant me the key, if only then to say the door should never be opened?

Chapter 49

Rebecca has made a pot of tea and is sitting out alone on the west facing deck. She is taking contemplative sips from a China cup so fine it is almost transparent. The boards are warm and cracking in the sun around her, and the sweet scent of pines rises from the valley below.

I am not with her, you understand, but I *am* watching her - and I am inventing the China cup, again, though it adds a sense of ritual to the scene. I think it was Emma who must have left them, psychically at least, last time she came to visit.

Dreamshock?

No!

Oh, do keep up, Lewis; I have entered rather a deep meditative state now and have merely made a short journey in my mind to imagine her thus, also to imagine her thoughts and her feelings. How much of this is real? I don't know, but that does not mean I cannot learn from it.

She is fond of me, I know. As for love I'm not sure, or is it that I dare not hope? or is it more that I am unsure of myself in this regard? Love poses so many questions. And at our time of life, even such a thing as defining what love is can seem pedantic when the simple act of being with someone you like stirs you more than love ever did when you were young? Is it not enough we are together, and can feel warmly towards each other, and our lovemaking is so easy and so much fun?

Such a thing may itself be love, Lewis.

Again, I do not know.

All the old certainties are falling away from me now.

And it hardly matters.

She's here, and I am glad for it.

She is not thinking of escape - I'm talking metaphysically now. She wants to see out the end of our line in time, with me, and thinks of something else for now, something extraordinary.

But what?

She's wondering how we can use the knowledge we've gained in order to avoid annihilation, not just for ourselves, but for everyone we know; for Raul and Dora, and Amelia Grey and even, I suppose, all the Stricklands, and the tattooed bruisers as well, to say nothing,

I suppose of your mysterious disembodied, sneak thieving self, Lewis.

Indeed, she is; she's thinking of how she might save the whole world, and you in it.

Is Emma's key so profound a thing as that?

This then,... this shall be her ministry, my Priestess.

I leave her to it.

Hers is a mind that can unpick a Rubic's cube in a couple of minutes, while mine never could, not even when the solution was in front of me, for then I had not the patience to memorise it. Perhaps in another version of my life things are different, perhaps in another life I am puzzling over how to save myself from this one.

Don't bore me with your scepticism, Lewis; I really do not care. And anyway, none of this should be news to you. Theories of the parallel nature of time, and the fourth dimension are as old as the hills. Even the chattering classes made hobbies of it in the first half of the twentieth century. Have you not read your files on Dunne, Osupensky, Blavatsky? Priestly? Huxley?

It's a pity the chattering classes who followed them forgot their dreams, turned to the adoration of celebrity instead, leaving the forest of the unknown overhung with creepers, its trails forgotten, along with the names of its spirits, and its long lost pioneers. It's a pity it's been left to amateur hacks like me to open things up again, for we have hardly the same panache, and are entirely lacking in the necessary credentials.

I teach English. I over-analyze Steinbeck for the benefit of young minds who no longer care about the dichotomy of proletarians and capitalists, even though we are sliding back that way faster than we can say prole-food. Our kids would much rather be striking poses on social media sites, conveniently laying down the slime-trails of their unfortunate excesses for you to follow, Lewis. They believe they shall never feel hunger again, and will be for ever happy, so long as they have the means to beg, steal or borrow a 'Droid, with a 3G connection.

Or a Gamestation.

They are stupefied, they grow fat and heavy with sleep.

Steinbeck?

The dust-bowl of America's calamitous depression, the loss of all certainties,... and the ensuing oppression of the penniless-many by the monied few. Wait! He's been haunting me from the beginning,

hasn't he? The old rogue. Have we no serviceable quotes of his we might use at this point for a serendipitous key? I'd Google, but you already know about the deadzone here. Wait, I have it; my memory serves in time: *Can you think that whatever made us would stop trying?*

East of Eden, Lewis.

Well can you?

Can there be a God, if all we now are can so easily be left to perish?

It depends how narrowly you define your reality, and how much room you leave for a metaphysical dimension. Not much in your case, I suppose, while in mine, as you know, I am permanently lost in it. Any quotes then from Steinbeck on the true nature of reality? None I can think of. For that we must consult the visionary and extraordinary fictionalist P. K. Dick, who tells us with disarming simplicity: *reality is that which, when you stop believing in it, doesn't go away.*

Stop believing in the world of our dreams, Lewis, and they dry up. All that's left is what we saw on the road yesterday, an armed and violently rapacious anarchy. All the rest, all that stuff we comfort ourselves with - *that's* what we make up, *that's* what we believe in.

But how can we go on without belief?

In something!

"It's a pity," she says.

Who says?

My beautiful vicar, Lewis.

She's crouching by the tarn now - blue suit, collar, and a long, thin cigar. She's not there in physical reality - you understand this by now, I hope, or I've been wasting my breath. She's an hallucination, possibly, but quite real and effortlessly articulate. I wonder if Rebecca is projecting her. What? You wonder if I really follow my imaginative whims as much as this? Well, no one invited you to snoop on my life. When you go around looking under stones for a living, you should no longer be surprised at what crawls out.

"A pity?" I ask.

"To know that such a thing is possible," she muses. "That there are beings such as Emma, who can exploit things that way - shift about across all the possible time-lines of her greater being, while maintaining an awareness of each; that such a remarkable thing *is* possible, yet that we are unable to use it in order to avert what we

suspect might be coming. It seems,... well it seems perverse, Timothy."

"But like Emma says, it hardly matters. There are lines in time where it's already happened, maybe a thousand times, and made no difference to anything. We should not be so attached to our own lives that we struggle to preserve them beyond what's decent or realistic."

"Granted, and well spoken, but why else would we have been shown it, Timothy?"

"I don't know. There are a lot of things I've been shown that I don't understand, and I don't suppose I'm going to solve any of them between now and next week."

"Don't you want to live? Don't you want to feel the love of God through your life with Rebecca? If enough people were aware of the power of the dreaming, the power of intention, we might,..."

"What? Pray for deliverance?"

"You smile? You think it unrealistic to hope?"

"My darling Reverend, a rock the size of greater London is about to hit the earth. The forces involved are unimaginable. Are you suggesting we divert it with prayer? As for the power of the dreaming, we both know it's largely dead now. At best we might raise a feeble whimper of complaint, but we'd be better maintaining our dignity."

She laughs. "How terribly *English* of you! You're spending too much time with Emma - that Victorian stiff upper lip is beginning to inform your thinking. Admittedly, it does seem rather an intractable problem, and I'm sure you're right, but that's no reason to give up now, is it?" She looks at me then. "Timothy? If we're to avert disaster, it might require a sacrifice on your part."

"You mean I'll have to renounce Rebecca? I've already worked that one out, but no deal. I'd sooner die – literally - than face the possibility of life in a universe where we never meet again."

"I know that, *silly*. But I was meaning your sense of powerlessness. I think you'd have to renounce it for good. I'd want you to promise me you'll tell Strickland next time you see him that he can shove his suit and his overstuffed diary so far up his arse, it makes his eyes water."

"Ha,... that wouldn't be much of a sacrifice. It would be my pleasure. And I promise, absolutely, hand on heart."

"And you'd have to abandon all your dreams of early

retirement."

"Oh? But I was rather counting on those. In fact, I've begun thinking of nothing else - at least before we were all given something else to think about."

"Well, all right, but only in so far as a change of vocation would do you more good. You have substantial savings, Timothy. Remember? Once the banks have recovered from their panic, you could use your money to buy Whittaker's bookshop, and still live without worrying about having to earn a living - your lifestyle is hardly extravagant."

"With respect that doesn't sound like a very good investment. Reading has gone the way of dreaming. And spelling. I'd be lucky if I made anything. After all, that's why Whittaker's selling. There are shops giving books away now. Who in their right mind would pay money for them?"

"You're not listening, You don't need to earn anything. Stop thinking in materialistic terms. Living modestly, you could make normal retirement age on your savings alone, follow the Whittakers into a serene old age. You know this. As for the bookshop, you might also use it as a venue for dream workshops, or you might teach Tai Chi. And there are still people who value rare books, rare wisdom - so don't be too hasty in throwing out those books. I think I want you to teach dreaming, Timothy. If there's one subject you know better than books, it's how to dream. You were wondering what it was that was left for your generation to do. Well there it is. Leave materialism to the young, they have need of it. But the dreaming, and the reconstruction of a greater, nobler, more enchanted world: that can only come from you, and others like you." She nods, having hit upon the phrase that pleases her best: That’s it, you must re-enchant the world."

"Others like me? Dreamers, shirkers, n'er-do-wells. People who talk garbled nonsense to the clouds, but haven't the ability to even tie their own shoe-laces? They drive me nuts! Why would I want to be around people like that? If they're the answer to the world's ills, then God help us."

She's nodding. "I don't know if you'd call it God these days, Timothy. But have you not thought that from a certain strange perspective, someone or something is helping you."

I watch her reflection in the water. The reflection smiles at me, then she reaches down and makes ripples with a sweep of her

fingertip - ripples that obliterate her image, and when I look up she's gone. Except she was never really there, and all I'm left with is the rather stupid idea of me teaching dreaming to people so far out of their own heads they no longer know what day it is.

Who listens to me, anyway, Lewis – I mean apart from you?

Even I don't listen to me.

Ah,...

"You have pointed fingers at all your insecurities," she says. "You recognise their face. Know then that all might be dissolved only by believing a little more in yourself. No more thoughts of retreating back into the womb. Your place is in the world, and if you do not like the world the way it is, then,... "

What? Change it?

But you can't change the world. That's what middle age is about. It's about discovering the world is mad, and there's not a damned thing you can do about it.

Chapter 50

I find Rebecca now, as I have imagined her, a neat little lotus upon the rear deck. She smiles at my approach, lifts her hand for me to take, then tugs me gently down beside her.

"I know what you're thinking," she says. "And I don't want this to come between us."

But it already has, Rebecca.

"I know you think it already has," she says "But really, it hasn't."

How hasn't it?

"You must believe I have not lost faith in our purpose, Timothy, in the reason for our coming together, and being here. I told you our paths have merged and are not for going their separate ways. And I still mean that."

"All right."

She looks aside for a moment, as if to gather courage. "I must ask you for permission to do something you might not approve of."

"Oh?"

"Don't look so serious. It's not that bad."

"Okay,"

"I've decided, I'd like Raul to paint me nude."

I laugh. I don't know what I'd been expecting, but it was not this. "Well,... I'm sure he'd like that. But why would you need my permission?"

"Don't be so noble, Timothy. We are lovers, and you're supposed to be jealous of another man's eyes seeing what you imagine only yours have seen. And I'm not sure I like it that you find the idea amusing."

"All right. I'm sorry. But if it's what you want to do, then you must do it."

"There is a catch."

"Oh?"

"I'd want to be painted nude, with you. Both of us nude. Together. Embracing, like Adam and Eve."

“Before or after the fall?”

“I’m trying to be serious.”

"Em,... sorry. Okay. But Raul will probably find that bit hilarious."

“Which bit.”

“My nudity. Yours he’ll have no problem with at all.”

"I'd want him to work from photographs, you know? And then I'd want one or two of those pictures to go missing, and end up being passed to the biggest gossip in the school, just to ensure they wind up plastered, and viral all over Facebook. We might even end up in the papers, Timbo."

"Dare I ask why you’d want to risk that?"

"Because I think we're both still afraid to be seen without our clothes on. You the shaman, me the priestess. Isn't that reason enough? What's the matter?"

"I'm just trying to imagine walking into class knowing everyone sitting there has a picture of me in the buff."

"Well, if I can do it, so can you. There's not a schoolboy who has walked by me or any other woman, and not wondered what our tits look like. That's just the way it is, and a woman gets used to it."

"Is that what we really are though, undressed? Priestess and Shaman?"

"It's a start. A clean slate. It's a throwing away of whatever masks we've been used to in the past."

"Kind of a nudist thing then?"

She smiles. "Bless you Tim, you're at your most endearing when you're being deliberately obtuse. Yes,... kind of like a nudist thing. But what happens when one undresses?"

"One gets cold?"

"One dresses again. Only this time, we're more careful in the clothes we wear. We've both been gathering up the pieces of our souls, you and I, the pieces we lost along the way, getting them to join in with us again. And you know what? They've been talking to one another, deciding how they want to be, where they want our lives to go, and this is it. To deny them that risks leaving them all behind again."

"Well, okay. I don't mind, and I'm sure Raul will go for it. We may even shock him, which would be a first. As for the Facebook thing, why not? It doesn't matter anyway - I've a feeling I'll not be at the school for very long now."

"We won't get fired for it, if that's what you're thinking. What we do in our own time is no one else's business. And not our fault if photographs go missing. You know what Raul’s like – a little scatter brained. I’m sure he didn’t mean to do it."

"You might not get fired, but I will, when I say to Strickland

what I should have said to him all year. The bits of soul who have caught up with me resent the way I bite my tongue all the time. So I'm not going to do it any more. I'm thinking I should buy the bookshop, actually. I mean,... if we survive at all."

"You know, I've just been thinking the same thing. I was looking at it when we were there - so many rooms and so many of them filled with junk. We could specialise, do stuff on dreaming. New age. Christianity. Crystals. Yoga. That sort of thing."

"We?"

"Yes, I'd like to live with you in your bookshop. I like Penrith. Is that okay?"

"Em,... I don't see why not. And shall we spend our days off here, growing potatoes and gobbling strawberries?"

"Oh yes, please! We'll not have two ha'pennys to rub together of course, but it sounds idyllic. But won't you tire of my snoring?"

"You don't snore. Well,... only very softly. And no, I shall not tire of it."

"And can we swap Rosy and your old Volvo for one of those little open top sports car things?"

"You'd sell Rosy?"

"She's a symbol, Tim. My life on wheels. I need to feel I've finally arrived at something, no matter how weird."

"To be honest I was thinking along the lines of a little open-top sports car myself, recently but I dismissed it as menopausal. Perhaps that's one piece of soul I've been neglecting. Can it be bright red, with one of those throaty exhaust modifications? We'll look ridiculous in it of course, zipping up and down the back lanes with the top down."

"Oh, but it sounds such fun! But the metaphor we're looking at there of course is *two seats*."

All right, Lewis; I know, I know,...

We are only playing games here. We are tossing around sweet what-ifs, and though they are very sweet indeed, sweet as Rebecca's strawberry kisses, is that reason enough to believe in them, that they might be made reality? Sadly, I think not.

And why not?

It is the fear at the root of all prayer, that we might not be *important* enough to carry the dream through, when so much else is pointing in another, less promising direction.

She reads my thoughts again, squeezes my hand, pulls my

attention back to her gaze. "Believe," she says. "There might just be a way. We've not come this far, for it all to have been for nothing."

"We'd need a small miracle, Rebecca."

"No, actually we need a great big one. But if we don't ask, we'll never know, will we?"

"Ask?"

"Pray, Timothy. Go worry your gods about it. And I shall worry mine."

Chapter 51

Afternoon now. The sun is warm, the air humid and I am on the rear deck with the radio. I tweak the dial but find only static. I wind the handle and the static begins to howl. I drift it off to a gentle hiss, like a distant waterfall, and sink back into my thoughts.

Achieving a state of heightened consciousness while dreaming is something that can be taught, we all know this - perhaps even you know it, Lewis. Reports of lucid dreaming were once considered to be the fancy of lunatics and woolly headed fantasists, but they are nowadays considered pedestrian. What you do with such a faculty, however, is another matter. If you still have a very flat earth, scientistic view of dreams, then most likely you will do nothing of any value with it at all.

Of my own experience I can say that entering the dreaming, we have no choice, at first, in the scenery we are set. It is like walking out each night, upon a random stage, among the cast of a play we have not met before. The characters are arrayed in all their finery, the mystery women, the mischievous men, the jesters, the sages, the shadows, the soul-images, and the fantastic creatures. We get by, ad-libbing our lines, but once we have the measure of the dream, we can ride it like a tamed horse, lead it in all manner of interesting directions, where dreams can teach us things, provided we do not read them too literally. How do we do this? By imaginative construction, by guided dialogue, and by simply asking it of the dream.

Waking is another matter. It is a thing we have no control over, no matter how long we live. We wake back always, and unfailingly to the same portal through which we entered the dreaming, namely our own bed and with the continuity of our time-line intact. We go to sleep on the night of the twenty fourth, and we wake on the morning of the twenty fifth. These are the immutable facts of reality, and the dreaming.

Or they used to be.

Progressing in the dreaming, we learn to define the stage onto which we walk. We can pick a scene from another dream and re-enter it, or we can imagine ourselves vividly in a place that is either known or unknown to us, and wake up to it, in the dreaming. So why do I find it so shocking the idea we can similarly manipulate

our re-entry into ordinary waking reality? Why do I find it so hard to believe that by some means, as yet unknown to me, we can choose to wake back *to an earlier point in our lives*?

And if I am offered the means, *the secret*, why would I shy away from it?

In case you've not been paying attention Lewis, this is the road that is now opening for us, that we can apparently travel *back* in time, wake up to a version of our earlier selves. I'm not talking about a lucid dream-life now, in the interstitial non-space of the dreaming, like the ones I have shown you thus far, but a normal, three dimensional, ordinary waking-reality kind of life.

But at an earlier time of our lives!

The materialist will object on the basis of an apparent paradox, that the second time around we might choose not to have children, for example, thereby denying life to those who are already alive. But this would be to operate by the narrow rules of materialism itself, which cannot admit to more than one line in time, and which rejects all, as yet, unfalsifiable hypotheses as nonsense.

In a more flexible view of the cosmos, however, the one revealed to me by Lady Emma Louise Hollander, we simply make another line, from that point, one in which we do not have children. What then happens is not a winding back of time at all, but a splitting off into the different ways our lives might have turned out. Our life, were we only fully aware of it, would appear more like a tree instead of a single branch. Seeing it as such we would then nod wisely and say - *ah, of course! This explains so much.*

Which reminds me of the question Rebecca asked earlier:

When would I most like to wake back to?

Would it be that night, when Raul invited me to his house? Or should it be when I learned Rebecca would be there, then I might have chosen not to go, then none of what I have described to you would have happened - at least not in the time line from which I was or am writing to you now.

Are you keeping up, Lewis?

Me neither - it matters not - let us continue groping along together like blind men.

I imagine I would have spent the weeks here, entirely alone, as I always do, living another life, without Rebecca, and reporting to you nothing more intriguing than the life of birds. Indeed, a part of me *is* doing this, I know he is, and if Emma is to be believed, I can

join him, I can *be* that person any time I sleep. Then my memories of this life will fade, like dreams on waking, as my reality swells elsewhere, leaving nothing more than a feeling of unease, and someone walking over my grave.

But then how do I get back?

Back to where?

To where I belong!

But if these are all my lives, then do I not belong everywhere and anywhere at the same time?

How can this be so?

How can I check the veracity of these dubious travellers tales? If I am to believe my own story, then I need only solve Emma's riddle, or simply ask Rebecca, who has already solved it. Emma is skilled in these matters. She works at retaining the memories of her other lives but, like dream recall, it is an imperfect thing, and we are easily distracted. Me? I'd be sure to cock it up and forget all that's ever happened here. And the asteroid will still strike and ruin the earth.

No, to save my skin, I would have to go much further back in time, perhaps even to my boyhood, Why so? Well, we are not entirely responsible for the shaping of our own futures, Lewis. We are subject to the decisions of others, also of chance events in the universe itself. Go far enough back, and something is bound to distract or deflect, or even not give birth to that asteroid in the first place.

But going so far back as that, I would know a very different life, and losing all knowledge of the dreaming I would be trapped in that ordinary waking reality, with no guarantee I would be happy, or see my way through to a time of peace and well being. And Rebecca might have succumbed to the advances of that sleazy choreographer, and consequently might never slip from that wet stage to injure herself so grievously.

But more crucially, as I keep telling you, we would never meet.

I would not know her any more.

Only here can I know her.

Still, it reassures me, the possibility there are all these other avenues to my life; that nothing is left unexplored, that from that first spark of being; all the roads that open to me are taken, that I grow like a tree, grow into dimensions beyond knowing.

Shake a dice, Lewis, and you split your life into six directions.

Shake a dice in each of those, and you create six more openings in each life, that's thirty six possible lives, thirty six branches of the tree in nothing more than the blink of an eye. It sounds complicated, but it's not. Indeed it is among the simpler interpretations of Quantum Theory, but I won't bring that up as it is the slippery weapon of many a charlatan, to use Quantum Physics as their grounding proof - a thing so strange it can be used to support all manner of dubious hypotheses. But if it were true, and the entire tree of my life could be brought to a full consciousness of itself and all its branches, what then? Surely it would shake the whole thing to its roots.

I suspect you would become a joke to me, Lewis, and I would no longer be afraid of anything, least of all your imagined motives. The tree of my life would blossom; the whole forest of trees that *we are* would bloom. This,... this is where we're heading. This is how we shall evolve! One tree at a time,...

Okay, lucky for you, this is just a story, and you need not believe in it.

All right,... so,..

Wait a second!

Through the static the voice of the BBC comes suddenly.

A pair of Lions have been shot on the M25.

What?

Are you getting this too?

They had escaped from a private zoo. The owner cannot be traced, and is believed to have recently left/fled the country. There is a suggestion the Lions were turned out to fend for themselves. They did so by devouring several sheep and mauling a passing cyclist.

There are also rumours that a fleet of air-force jets has been assembling at Brize Norton. Is the government about to decamp? And who is bold enough to ask such questions now, at the risk of being made to feel stupid? The Government and Ministry of Defence decline to comment. Nor will they comment on rumours that the entire naval fleet is making rendezvous off Gibralta, with a view to shelter in the Med.

Shelter from what?

From the mega-tsunami that will ripple across all the world's oceans at least five times over, after the asteroid strikes. I know you do not comment on matters of security, Lewis, but it does not take a

gifted spy to note that Portsmouth is now empty, according to our correspondent at least, that the long grey vessels have slipped their berths overnight, put to sea.

While I listen to the news, Rebecca paces the deck, slowly. She is drawn in, yet also repelled by our need for information.

I note there is not a trace of her limp, now.

"They won't leave yet," she says.

"Who?"

"The government. Key personnel. It's too soon. They'll show their faces until twenty four hours before the strike."

"Twenty four hours?"

"Flying time to Oz."

"You think that's where they'll go?"

"It's where we'd go, isn't it? It makes sense. It's brutal, but it doesn't alter the facts, Timothy. And we mustn't blame them. They really have no choice. If there's a chance of surviving, they must take it. How else are they to return and take charge?"

"Take charge of what?"

I realise the dearth of information is now rendering fancy as truth.

This asteroid is *not* going to strike the earth.

Yes it *is*.

No, it isn't.

But if it does, it presents a novel problem for political analysts: a government in exile, one whose country no longer physically exists, or is so transformed by molten lava and a fucking great hole, and the fact that its population has been vaporised by pyroclastic flows. The only ones to survive will be the rich who could afford flights out. But who then will they employ to tie their shoe-laces?

God forbid they should have to do it for themselves!

Except, I'm not thinking: in a race to the bottom there is always an infinite supply of unfortunate migrant slaves.

Rebecca walks a little way down the valley and sits upon a boulder, shielding her eyes from the sun. Here she takes in the view for a while, and I think to join her, but then she lowers her head, folds her hands upon her lap, sinks deep inside herself, and prays.

Meanwhile, the radio begins to tell me of another aged celebrity accused of touching a girl's bottom. These are easy accusations to make, but there is something in us that wants to believe in them, in the corruption of all we once valued and trusted. It sounds repulsive

now, that when we should be making our peace with God, there are voices still pedalling this pernicious gossip. I switch the radio off, lean back against the warm planks of the cabin, close my eyes and seek the prayers within myself.

Rebecca is right. She should go pester her God, and I should go pester all of mine. Except, mine, in the pagan sense are all manifestations of the One. Christians square up to the one directly. We pagans prefer to negotiate through the aegis of the daemonry.

The lesser gods, Lewis.

Patterns swirl before my eyes, kaleidoscopic snowstorms congeal into steady geometric shapes which give way to symbols, to glyphs. Thus I ride the storms in peace, thinking only to give Rebecca space, to pray, and then let her come to me, disturb me from my reverie when she is ready, but at some point I drop out of time, and the images become a wide canvas, bright white on which is now rendered a vivid scene from childhood.

Now this is interesting!

Mrs Lovelace is dashing letters upon the blackboard, the chalk breaking under the pressure as her hand jerks furiously, raising a squeal and a clatter. Mrs Lovelace; black hair, long and frizzed with strands of steel. She has a white face and a gash of red lipstick, her whole appearance a shock upon the senses. She should be telling me the stories of the Saints, but realises we are about to leave our primary education, and we cannot do our sums yet, so she is catching up, cramming several years of work into the space of this one very hot, sleepy afternoon.

No, not dreaming, Lewis.

This is active imagination.

Call it conscious daydreaming if you like; it can be more real than dreaming.

But like dreams, it should never be read literally.

She is deriving a formula for the solution of quadratic equations, and I want to tell her she need not worry about this, that I will not encounter this for another five years, that my teachers at Secondary School will take care of it, and I have already solved for myself the problems of long multiplication and division. Then I am wondering why she singles me out for attention - her startling blue eyes coming back always to me, and her red gash of a mouth pursed a little as if struggling with something she is holding back, but which she feels I should know, and does not know if she should tell it.

Does not know if I can handle it!

Then she starts to write up the letters of Emma's cipher, but does not string them out in a long line. Instead she lays them, one neat block on top of the other. She forms a square from them, and I have a moment of insight. There are forty nine letters, the square of seven. I want to tell her I have it now, that all my years at Middleton C of E Primary School have not been wasted, that I have indeed caught them up in this one sleepy afternoon, in this one moment of blinding insight.

Except,... what exactly have I caught up with?

I'm looking at the board, at the pattern of the letters, reading out words, jumbles of words, but a little more coherent than before. And then Mrs Lovelace is rubbing them out, as if she has changed her mind. But the essential information is already there. A seven by seven square. And a way to read it.

Oh,... not this again!

Why is the universe so insistent? I do not want the information, Lewis. I am confused by it. It is *dangerous*. I will lose myself in it, for I am not as skilled as Emma.

More importantly I could lose Rebecca.

Yet it will come. I know it! When something like this is bubbling from the unconscious, to suppress it is even more dangerous.

So,...

Playtime now. Rebecca is waiting for me. She is a robust little girl in year two. I don't understand her sullen looks, nor her annoying shadowing of me at every turn these past weeks. She pulls a stick of Wriggleys from her stocking (chewing gum is forbidden) and pushes it at me.

"Wanna a stick of spuggy?"

Spuggy? Yes,... we used to call it that. I take it, because there is something in me that recoils from all risk of hurting this little girl's feelings. She asks if I will play hopskotch.

Have I forgotten I knew her at Primary School? Or am I simply making it up? And even if I did not know her, I mean not *really*, can I not make it true by believing it to be so? And in some version of my life, might it not be true anyway?

Yes, Lewis. It might!

Let me see: she starts half way through the term, a shaggy haired, pugnacious little creature, dressed entirely from the charity box, in clothes that are clean but crumpled and too big for her. Her

father is the new penniless curate at Saint Paul's. She will go on eventually to Saint Aidens. My parents have grown tired of the Church and are sending me to Parklands instead, to the comprehensive school where God is irrelevant, and where they do not argue over who shall be rose-queen. Her father will indeed become the vicar of the Parish Church, and already no one will talk to her on account of her strange parentage. They will only tease her and try to get her into trouble, try to make a rebel out of her.

Does she remember any of this?

Why am I remembering it now?

You aren't remembering anything Timothy; you're making it up!

No, this is a definite memory.

Or is it a memory of another time?

Can I wake back to this?

Can I live my whole life again from this point?

I am on the brink of giving way to it, of stepping in and living it - but only for a while - making mental notes, setting waypoints for the later, deeper dreaming of it, and for the possible waking back,... for it seems suddenly a beguiling thing.

And perhaps from here chance might spare us the asteroid.

But then:

"Tim?"

"Huh?"

I shudder back to reality. Rebecca is crouching beside me, hand on my arm.

I don't wait for her to say anything, but blurt out: "You didn't tell me you went to Middleton C of E."

She's puzzled. "I didn't,... well, I mean,... not for long. A term, I think. Maybe less. My father was curate at the Parish Church before taking over, but it was a seriously crap school, Tim. Even he said that, so he sent me as a boarder to Saint Aidens at Lancaster. I still have the scars from that period. I've told you this."

"I went to Middleton C of E."

"I know, you said."

"Then,... we might have met. When you were there. I mean briefly."

"It's possible, but I really don't remember. I don't remember anything of my time there."

"I might have been, say,... eleven. And you would have been six, which makes you forty five now."

She grants me a tight little smile. "Yes, indeed I *might* be forty five."

"It's possible then,... possible we met as children?"

"Possible,... of course it's *possible*. But if we're going to bring parallel universes into it, it's also possible I'm married to George Clooney in another life."

"George is of our generation, so, yes, that's a possibility, but only in the tail end of the Gaussian curve."

"The what?"

"Mathematical terminology, statistics, probability."

"Meaning?"

"Slim chance, Rebecca. Infinitesimally slim - that you might be married to George Clooney."

"Thanks very much. I'll settle for Brad Pitt, then."

"Equally unlikely, I'm afraid. It's more likely we might have met, back then, I think, than you be married to George Clooney, or Brad Pitt."

"All right. *I concede*. But then so what?"

"But then so *everything*. If everything that can happen, happens, then somewhere there's a line in time, indeed a whole branch of lines in time where we have known each other since we were children."

She strokes my face, and I enjoy the tenderness of it. "Tim you say the nicest things. And I would dearly like to believe it's true."

"I know it's true."

"And so?"

"And so,... we will always be together,.. somewhere."

"Maybe. Oh,... I'd like to think so. That would be sweet."

I want to ask if she will come there with me. If she will dream it with me, tonight, and there in the dream, reveal her secret to me, Emma's secret, of how we might wake up, and still be there in the dream, only the dream made real, the dream made an ordinary waking reality.

Except,...

How could I retain, even for a moment, the knowledge of the whole of my adult life in the mind of a child? It would leak away, a dream on waking, and there is nothing to say that having met Rebecca in childhood we would form a lifelong attachment. She will go to St Aiden's, and from there to London, and the West End stage, and fall prey to a sleazy choreographer. And I will become a

teacher, in Middleton, trying my whole life to correct the omissions of Mrs Lovelace.

Wait,... is that what I've been doing?

Yes, Timothy. Of course it is.

Wow! That's amazing!

What an incredible insight in to my life!

But focus now,.... what's that Rebecca's saying? She looks so serious:

"Dream with me, Tim? And bring your girls. We're going to need them. But dress them decently this time, okay? Sunday best, for Church. Combed hair, sober dresses and shiny shoes. And definitely no swords."

"What?"

"Hush now, no questions. I have a plan. We're going in deep tonight, deeper than we've ever been before."

Chapter 52

Probability, Lewis! How probable is it I would become a teacher? What were the chances, say from the age of ten? One might think, back then, my future was still wide open, the ways ahead unmarked, undefined. But I realise my resentment of the Church sprouted from seeds sown when I was five, when my parents sent me to Middleton C of E Primary, and for no better reason than it was easier (and cheaper) for me to walk there than catch a bus to where the schools were all the better for being entirely Godless.

So, the future, my future, was being shaped even then, leading to a higher probability of my early teens being spent with a desire to catch up the years of learning I had lost. And this in turn was to yield a higher probability of the desire that other children would not suffer the way I had, that I would indeed become a teacher, and a teacher unlike any of the incompetents and berserkers who had intimidated me, and taught me nothing. I would become a professional man, pass on my love of literature and language.

Thus it is, from the fresh perspective of these past weeks now, I see the shape of my personal line in time forming, reaching out, and budding each of these probabilities into reality and new growth. But we are not entirely in control. Free will butts up against the universal reality, also the will of others. For what chance then a tidal wave of suits would sweep all before it and turn our schools into businesses with flowery mission statements, managed by tick-boxes? And if we really do see the world as we are? What part of *me* has manifested such a disaster as *this*?

I am going to die, of course. But at least I am confident now the tree of my life will blossom regardless, all be it in dimensions that are closed to me. Indeed I am led to believe it will sprout eternally from the root of my birth, and from every point thereafter. And even where the dead wood falls away, there shall always be new growth, new possibilities springing from every moment of my life. For ever. Thus, sadness and fear at my imminent demise ought to dissolve into joy at the potential each life might yet yield.

No power on earth can alter this.

I don't think.

But it seems no power on earth can alter the fear either. Why the fear, I wonder? Is it that I lack faith in this, my own, as in all

other cosmologies?

But wait a second, where the Hell am I now?

Oh, I remember.

Dreaming!

I am emerging the other side of the Yoga. It's a hillside, thick with grass, a sloping meadow, rich, black soil and a little boggy in the margins, dotted with the creamy meadowsweet and the little yellow stars of buttercup. There's a trace of a path, snaking its silvery way down to a valley bottom where there curls the blue ribbon of broad river under clear skies, and a church spire rising from a stand of shimmering oaks.

And me: Sunday best - dark suit and tie, and a gathering of women. Yes, Lewis, my harem of girls, but dressed this morning in modest suits with very chaste and tasteful long skirts. They have pale skins and quiet demeanours - *my seven sisters, come to be whatever I need them to be for me.*

They are waiting, watching, curious as my consciousness crystallises in this nether place. One of them makes a gesture, crossing her index fingers for me to see. It piques my interest, and its strangeness has me waking in the dream properly. She smiles at my resurfacing. A nice trick. I shall remember it.

"Thanks, I was a little slow there."

She nods, patient, understanding, then sighs - here we are again then, she's saying. What do you want from us, this time? The girls look about them. It is a perfect summer's day, as perfect as we can make it. I remember bees, and they buzz. I remember the swish of grass, and a gentle breeze comes to stir them. My girls are scented, as is the grass, and the earth. I crouch and take a pinch of earth. It is a fine, sandy loam and leaves a moist smudge in the macroscopic troughs of my fingerprints.

How can this not be real?

All right,...

Where's Rebecca? No Rebecca? Is she struggling to sleep, or has she gone on ahead of me. Am I to follow her?

But where?

Dress for Church, she'd said. Sunday Best.

Okay, well here we are.

The church spire points heavenwards, misleading us for millennia into thinking of heaven as a place that can be pointed to, that it is up *there*, out *there*, *somewhere*, when where it is, is

nowhere, yet everywhere at the same time. All of this, and nowhere other than inside of us. No thing exists, Lewis! Really, it's the only thing that explains how anything can exist at all!

Have I told you this before?

I'm sure I have. But trust me, it's the most important snippet of intelligence you shall hear from me, or the most insane - take your pick. I am assured however, you shall merely ignore it. No flashing lights on your console of danger-words. It's an unusual sedition then, this thing Rebecca and I are about, now we enter our middle years, one whose traces shall pass ghost-like through your antenna. Make no mistake though, we shall change the world, given a chance, and there is nothing you can do about it.

Wait, what am I talking about?

Focus, Tim. Focus!

The church bells ring, a fine, clattering peal, as if for the celebration of a wedding. I can feel Rebecca in it. But at the same time, the hedgerow at the meadow's rim becomes dotted with the figures of burly men. They wear cockeyed caps, like comic-book blackguards, and their shirtsleeves are rolled up to reveal Jolly-Tar tattoos. Each carries a cudgel and wears a roguish grin. Empty bottles of mother's ruin litter the grass at their feet.

Drunken rapine, and cudgels.

Doubts, Lewis!

Mind trolls.

Note though, how I must own them. They are parts of me, as is everything I see. Note well, as it says in the Talmud: we never see the world as it is.

But as we are.

My girls each carry a slender cane. It is like the one Rebecca uses with her best clothes. I have only just noticed this, or more likely I have only just added it to my dream inventory. Of the seven, five of my sisters unscrew the tops of these canes and draw out a long blade. It has the same cold, shiny slenderness as a sporting rapier, complete with an uncompromising point. I know Rebecca has said no swords, and I hope she will forgive this deception, but it is my most efficient symbol in dispatching the shadows that stalk me. So, the five set out to defend the boundary, while I lend my arms to the remaining two, and we make our way towards the church.

Thus we arrive, pushing open the melodramatically creaking

door and step inside to find,...

The church is empty.

I had been expecting a service in progress, like before, perhaps a riot of colourful flowers in their silver vases, the last notes of a hymn, and Rebecca in the pulpit, a snow-white cassock, a congregation waiting on her words. But it's worse than empty: the church is decaying; plaster hangs down from walls once white, but now stained with mildew; there is dust on the pews and in it the footprints of mice leading willy nilly in search of nourishment elsewhere.

But still the bells ring, suggesting life, suggesting something vital at the core.

I note the pulpit, carried aloft on an eagle's wings. It is the pulpit from Middelton C of E, at which I have stared with bored incomprehension on many a childhood Sunday morning, when the meadows have been calling. The church is ill-lit, but a glow comes from behind the pulpit, and draws us closer to investigate. We find a trapdoor, open, and steps leading down a candle-lit passage, down, down into the bowels of the earth. One of my sisters takes the lead, my hand upon her shoulder for courage, my other sister behind, her hand upon my shoulder, also lending courage. I count the steps as we descend: thirty five, thirty six, thirty seven,...

Scent of something old and church-musty, mingling with ancient temple fragrances.

Forty one, forty two, forty three,...

On the wall just here a SATOR square, chiselled into the stone:

SATOR
AREPO
TENET
OPERA
ROTAS

Twenty five letters, square of five, meaning the same thing no matter which way you read it. There is something curious, yet also trivial in its near impossibility. It's ancient too, found among the archaeology of Pompeii, and the earliest of Christian settlement beyond Palestine. This is all symbolic Lewis; we are descending through the layers upon which the church is built, descending to the esoteric core of belief, perhaps.

The SATOR square is a cipher, revealing the name of the Father, but only if you know how to read it. If you don't, it means nothing,

like that solution to a Rubic's cube.

There is a small revelation in this. I have often thought about it, flicking through the enigmatic verses of the Dao De Jing, a book from China's near mythic past, one that reveals its wisdom only to those who are ready for it, and which speaks in opaque riddles to those who aren't.

Like the bible.

Am I ready for that now, after all these years? Am I to be reborn? And will it be Rebecca who performs the rite?

Forty six, forty seven, forty eight,.....

And then we come to forty nine, square of seven, and a meaning I must avoid.

Unlike the SATOR square it can only be read in one way, a way that is the irreducible kernel of the truth underpinning reality.

What was that?

My sisters are conferring now. They whisper that the stairs are spiralling outward from a centre as we descend these layers of mystery. I think they're right but am puzzled when they suggest this might also be of symbolic importance. But now I've lost count and we continue our way uncertain of the measure of our progress.

Then, we turn a corner, step out into an intimate light and Rebecca is greeting me with a reassuring smile, welcoming me onto a stage. She wears a long black gown, like an academic on graduation day, and she has the white collar and the ornate bow of a non-conformist minister. There are people seated around us in a wide arc, and as my vision clears into her version of the dreaming, I see them stacked, tier upon tier, as in a lecture theatre.

Raul is on the front row, Hawaiian shirt and shorts. Legs splayed, arms crossed, he waits in sharp eyed expectation – or more likely imagining Rebecca undressed.

I'm looking for the font - so sure in my muddled dream-head that Rebecca is to baptise me. I do not mind this so much as the fact that it would not mean anything to me, and I don't want Rebecca to be under any false impressions.

She reads my thoughts, dismisses them with a shake of her head: "Silly," she says, and without guile gestures to the audience: "Look, I have gathered the sleeping, Timothy."

I do not ask how she might have achieved this.

It was the bells perhaps.

"Em,... okay. Gosh,... It's like being in a soccer stadium, or a

hundred times bigger? How many, do you think?"

"Oh,... there must be millions now. They come and go as the sun sweeps, some going as they wake, others joining as they enter sleep."

Naturally, I'm wondering why she is calling them, but then I see upon the board behind me Emma's cipher, written up in chalk:

ERDEHTF-ANEWPMO-MEEWFUT-AEWXIJI-SDOULDK-WONLYAS-EDREAMX

And its rearrangement as the square of forty nine:

ERDEHTF
ANEWPMO
MEEWFUT
AEWXIJI
SDOULDK
WONLYAS
EDREAMX

Yes, Lewis - this again!

Groan.

Rebecca is holding vigil, gathering to her all the sleeping souls of the earth, and is sharing with them the secret - this secret, the one I am avoiding. Cautiously I stare at the square and am relieved to find it makes no more sense to me than the letters arranged as a string. If there is a revelation in it, as in the SATOR square, I cannot see it. Am I to be spared then, by virtue of my own stupidity?

"You must decide your argument, Timothy," says Rebecca. "Decide it before the people gathered here, before the whole world, as I have decided mine. Those who agree with you will never unravel the message, for they will not see it. Those who agree with me, will see it appear before their eyes."

How does this feel for you, Lewis?

A little contrived perhaps?

A little strange?

A little dream-topsy-turvey?

For me it feels like conducting an intimate conversation in full earshot, and under the critical eyes of a million people, or ten million, a hundred million.

It gives me pause.

"This knowledge has come to us," she says. "It has come by means of dreams and chance, delivered into your pocket by a traveller, a conscious explorer of the time-lines of her own multi-

dimensioned life. It cannot now be hidden from the world, held in a notebook and bound with twine, to be lost for another hundred years, or to be consumed by fire and earthquake. Of those who see it, like us, few will believe it, and act upon it. But those who are ready, will. And should."

In the centre of the front row sits Emma, undemonstrative, quiet eyes, watching. It crosses my mind that there is no need for any of this, that if Emma's intent was to pass this information on to the world, she might easily have done so herself. But when I wonder how she might have gone about doing such a thing, I realise I would have done it exactly as she did, through a proxy, like me. There may be other proxies of course, other men for whom Emma is muse, dream haunter, stalker, hunter,...

But how many of them have acted as I have done.

And how many has she already given up on?

Raul unfolds his arms and begins to applaud. At first, his is a lone clapping, but is joined, slowly at first, by others, then rushing to rapture as the entire band of a sleeping world expresses its approval. Most will wake and remember nothing of this, for such is the way of dreams, but some may indeed remember, and those who believe in it will surely then begin the most remarkable journey of their lives.

I note Emma does not applaud, but in her eyes, and in her smile I read a certain pleasure, in me, and in Rebecca. And in her pleasure, I too am pleased. As for Rebecca, this is her show, the showgirl's show, and she the priestess. I've played my part in bringing things to this pass. I taught her a little, restored the dance in her that she might then teach others. The suburban shaman offers her his blessing, and his deference.

My sisters now take up protective positions in the wings, while a seat materialises next to Raul and I take my place beside him.

"Just think, Timothy," he says. "With the applecart so upset, who shall teach our children the important things in life? Shall it be the suited man with his sheet of ticks? Or shall it be the Hawaiian shirt and the Harris Tweed of those who no longer give a fuck about the applecart?"

"Raul, my friend, it's good to see you, but you're dreaming. Literally, and unconsciously too. Remember this: we'll all be dead in a couple of days - the Hawaiian shirts, the Harris Tweeds and the suits, all of us together. Gone. The applecart is irrelevant."

"Maybe so, but I've heard a rumour that while there are so many of us in one place, it might be worth a collective prayer. We are waiting for Rebecca to lead it."

"Tip the odds in our favour with a prayer?"

"What harm can it do?"

"No harm at all. Worth a try at least. But are we important enough to make a difference? This thing's had our name on it for millions of years. I'm all for the power of focused intent, but,...."

"We don't know how finely the odds are balanced, Timothy. Just a smidgen might make all the difference, even at this late stage of the game. Won't you join us?"

"Pray to God?"

"You think it's futile? Or do you fear to ask in case your prayers are not answered and this will disprove the existence of a benign, interventionist God?"

"I don't believe in a benign, interventionist God, Raul. I believe we can bend probabilities provided the odds aren't already stacked too much the other way."

"And as I said, we don't know how finely the probabilities are balanced. Some say it will hit, some say it won't. That sounds like a definite maybe to me, and therefore worth a punt."

"There's but one certainty for you," I tell him. "You must stay in Durban. Or get on a flight further south and east if you can. Get to Oz."

Rebecca has moved now. She has entered the pulpit wrapped by the eagle's wings, and the lecture theatre has become a church. Raul is in the pew in front of me now, Dora by his side. Meanwhile my thigh is pressed against Emma's. We have been here before, I think. She smiles, then lays her hand on mine as Rebecca raises hers to bless and to begin the prayer.

"Our Father,....

We bow our heads and mumble in unison. And as we pray, I feel Emma's hand tighten its grip.

She means to focus me.

"Thy will be done, on earth, as it is in heaven,...."

Her grip tightens more, steadying me now against a terrible trembling. She senses something in me before I'm aware of it myself - a volcano of emotion: Fear, Lewis. I do not want to die. I do not want to wake in some strange Summerland, or take my place once more, a new branch growing on the tree of my own greater life,

unaware of what has passed here, and without Rebecca, without any memory of the life I have already lived.

But most of all

Without Rebecca!

Emma holds open her notebook, yellowed pages, frayed and torn, shields it inside the larger pages of her book of hymns:

ERDEHTF
ANEWPMO
MEEWFUT
AEWXIJI
SDOULDK
WONLYAS
EDREAMX

Not this again!

It means nothing to me Emma.

"It spirals from the middle," she's saying. "Do you see?"

"But there's an x in the middle. And anyway I don't want to know."

"That's called a null. X marks the spot. Now, go right one. And read upwards, two letters."

Curious I read: "IF."

"Now across to the left, two letters."

"But I don't want this knowledge, Emma. I'm not like you. I couldn't control it."

"Read it."

"WE."

"*If we*,... Good. Now the rest. Come, we can do this. You and I."

"I can't. I'm not like you. I'm not dead yet."

"Cheeky. Neither am I. I'm as alive as you are, or you're as dead as me, same thing and equally meaningless. You know this. Now read!"

I'm fearful of her pushing me into something I'm not ready for, so take a breath and ask it of the dream, that I be moved to another locale. I do not want to be disturbed from Rebecca's prayer, for to bear it witness, even if I do not believe in it, seems a precious thing. But neither can I remain in Emma's presence.

The dream obliges at once.

So,..

I am by the lake now, the lake where Rebecca and I splashed down, deep in the mythic levels of the collective psyche. The

Unicorn is across the water, luminous against a velvet night, illumined by the small fire Rebecca and I nurtured into life here. It dips its head to drink.

But what's this?

Emma still holds my hand as we sit, thigh to thigh, now upon a hard flat rock. I do not fight the transition. It's futile. She truly can find me wherever I am, in the dreaming or otherwise. We do not move, you see? There is no such thing as geography in the dreaming, only a change of scene, and movement is likewise illusory.

"Is it not enough," I tell her. "We've passed your secret on, at least to those who are ready for it. Is that not what you wanted?"

"Yes, that is the revelation we are seeking," she says. "But in realising it, don't you see, we've now levelled up?"

"I don't understand. Levelled up?"

"It's a contemporary gaming term, Timothy. Contemporary, that is, from your perspective. It means,..."

"I know what it means."

"Do you? Really?"

"Emma, the last time we met you warned me about going too far with this. You warned me that in jumping back in time to an earlier part of my life, I would lose all memory of everything that had happened to send me there. You said I would be trapped, having possibly already lost Rebecca by never having met her in the first place. I don't want that to happen. If the price of what I feel when I'm with her is a short life, then so be it."

"I did say all of that. You're not wrong. Except, have you not thought, if I can explore my life through more than one line of time, Timothy, so can you. And Rebecca. And what better way to lead someone through a mystery than by telling them under no circumstances must they go there. I've been doing this with you since the beginning."

"Look, I don't know what you are - goddess, daemon, pixie. I don’t even know if your intentions are benign or destructive. I only know you've been haunting me for a long time. But you should know me by now, know that I can barely manage a competent job of my one line in time. By what miraculous faculty of the imagination am I supposed to manage more than that?"

"Well, me of course. I am that faculty, Timothy. You already possess it, since you already posses *me*."

A boat emerges from the mist. My warrior girls are cloaked once more in Phoenician purple, with silver breastplates. They have either come to protect me from this rising unease that always comes upon me in Emma's presence now, or they have come to ferry me across the water. These are the mythic levels after all, and we all know what that means:

"Am I dead? Has the asteroid struck while we slept?"

"It has already struck a thousand times over, Timothy."

"I don’t know what that means,..."

"Yes you do."

"You're too much, Emma. If I can't escape you in the dreaming, I'm going to force myself awake."

"You can't hide. Not anywhere. Here, look once more." She opens her notebook again:

ERDEHTF
ANEWPMO
MEEWFUT
AEWXIJI
SDOULDK
WONLYAS
EDREAMX

And I remember the instructions from somewhere: *X marks the spot, move one character to the right. Read spiraling first up and then round to the left.*

XIFWEWO ULDJUMP WENEEDO NLYASKI TOFTHED REAMASW EDREAMX

Did you get that, Lewis?

Does that make sense to you?

Can it really be so simple?

If we would jump, we need only ask it of the dream, as we dream!

Okay, so am I dreaming? And to what lengths would I go to escape Emma at this moment?

Maybe she cannot find me in the past,....

Chapter 53

All right,...

Six thirty: Rise; pee out my aching bladder, then shuffle into the back garden for Qigong, warming gradually to Tai Chi, then a little Kung Fu. These are Chinese exercises for mind and body, Lewis. There is no equivalent system in the West, where the imaginative faculties have been regarded with increasing suspicion since the day we laid Wordsworth to rest in Saint Oswald's churchyard.

I have the distinct feeling I might have told you this before.

Seven fifteen: Shower then breakfast, while I scroll through the news on the 'Droid: War, sexual perversion, torture, corruption, terror-bogeymen and economic collapse. Same as it's always been.

I have! I have told you this before!

Eight o'clock: I leave the house and drive from the southern suburbs of Middleton, to the north, to the school. My radio is tuned to the BBC. There's a politician of the party of the rich bluntly evading questions while landing rabbit punches on the policies of the party of the less rich. I note there is no party of the poor these days. The vacuum is suffocating. No one of intelligence talks about change any more, only of adaptation to what cannot be altered. The interview ends in a stalemated nothingness, fades back into the breathless reportage of war, rape, torture, corruption, and economic collapse.

I shiver: someone moving over my grave.

Emma? Is that you?

Leave me alone, dammit.

Eight fifteen, I'm cruising past Dave's Dodgy motors on Elm Street, and see an old MX5 for sale, all glittery in the early morning sunlight. Am I not overdue a change of vehicle, Lewis? Is a little sport's car too menopausal you think? But what's wrong with having a bit of fun?

Eight thirty: The day begins. Meeting with other male colleagues in the headmaster's office, all of us seated like ministers of state around a pretentious oval table. I don't know what the meeting's about yet, and I'm too old to care.

No,..

Wait. I *do* know.

I feel a shudder, followed by a moment of vision-reeling

giddiness. Raul looks across, raises an eyebrow in query. *Am I okay?* I nod my hurried assurance, then feel myself break out into a cold sweat.

My God!

I've done it.

But what have I done?

I've jumped *back* in time to an earlier waking reality, but I need to be further back than this to escape Emma. I need to be back years and years and years - maybe even to before I met Miranda. I did not consciously choose this time, I merely asked it of the dream to deliver me back somewhere. But there is never anything trivial in the dream's choices so I am left wondering what it is that is so significant about this day.

A week ago.

The meeting gets under way:

It's another reminder of the dress code: the question of the suit that some of us are still not wearing. Strickland has already won over the women, had them parading around like corporate tarts for months, so I'm left wondering at the source of his charisma, because all he does with the guys is get their backs up. When even educators fail to recognise the bullshit of a corrupt authority, we really are in trouble.

These are my thoughts, played back exactly from a week ago. But I observe them from a detached perspective.

Because I know I have been here before.

Interesting!

Knowing it changes it.

Strickland has cleared his throat and put up the first slide. Bullet points: *Empowerment, Emote, Enrich, Emphasize, Energize*. The five E's? But try as I might, they still do not gel into anything collectively meaningful. I decide not to forgive him the Americani"z"ation of the words Emphasise and Energise - apologies to my American snoopers - but that's the trouble with us English teachers, if we're not careful we no longer see poetry in words, just the spelling mistakes and the debatable points of grammar - not that there's any poetry here of course - just the same old bullshit.

Snoopers?

Yes,... Lewis.

Are you still here in this reality, or am I talking to myself now?

I note since the last meeting, another of our number has

succumbed. That leaves two of us, the other being Raul, still reassuringly casual in full volume Hawaiian shirt and shorts, and behind whose dazzle I take metaphorical cover. There's something cowardly in this. Raul is a big man, a tough man, a man afraid of nothing and I cover my own inadequacy by my association with him.

Is that true, Lewis?

Would I really betray him to you, if you tortured me?

Suits, like uniforms, hide incompetence. We've known this since the sixties, been fighting this since the sixties. I thought we'd won, so how the hell did the suits get the upper hand of a sudden? And when, behind this tired old cover of blistering cynicism, did I begin to feel so worthless?

"It was when they started shutting the factories," says Raul.

We're walking the corridors, now. The place is sweaty and dusty and crushed with barging uniforms. The feel of that meeting is still sliding from our faces, dripping uncomfortably with the raw, sulphurous egg that Strickland habitually regurgitates in our direction.

"It was when we reinstated the idea of *us* and *them*," he goes on."*Them* being the disenfranchised losers who are out of work, or languishing on minimum wage, and *us*,..."

I finish his sentence for him: "being the fucking conformist wankers who aren't?"

Girls gasp and turn aside, blushing at my language, mostly in approval.

He looks at me, pauses a moment in concern, a big hand briefly touches my shoulder. "Exactly. Are you all right, by the way, Timothy? You look a little peaky this morning."

"Oh, I'm okay, Raul. Bad bottle of wine, and a late night, you know?"

"You don't drink. And you have a peculiar vibe about you today. Are you sure everything's all right?"

"I'm okay. Hard to explain. De-mob happy, that's all."

His eyes flicker with curiosity. He knows I'm lying but decides to let it go. It seems I am not only changing my future, but also that of everyone I come into contact with. How can it be any other way?

"So, Raul, when are you getting the suit? I hear they have some deals on cheap sweatshop-threads at Freshways supermarket."

He flashes me a grin, grateful to join in my pointed change of

direction, away from the deeper danger zone, and back towards our more familiar future. "When hell freezes over. You?"

"I'll get one when I see you wearing one."

"Deal."

We laugh, shake hands on it - the last of the rebels.

Again.

Amelia Grey walks by; dark blue trouser suit, black high-heels clicking, hips swaying like a fashion model. Raul is distracted as she winks at us, and his eyes follow the roll of her deliciously cushioned derrière. But I watch from that detached perspective again, knowing I have been this way before, and how the last time I regretted allowing my own eyes to be so easily drawn.

And why?

Because now I note Miss Rayworth, age forty five, in a crumpled thrift shop suit. She looks at me with a penetrating insight that sends a shiver down my spine, then turns aside and follows her charges in. She's been watching me all year, and it is to my eternal shame I have not noticed her before this moment - I mean, really noticed her, but then who would? It takes a special kind of connection to see through the camouflage of a person's exterior.

"Does Mr. Hankinson fancy Miss Grey, sir?"

Audience titters.

"Hmm?"

We are settled in class now, thumbing through our readers - Steinbeck: Mice and Men.

Keep it together Tim; this is really interesting. What version of Rebecca did I just see?

"What man in his right mind wouldn't, Mr Stott?"

The day ripens.

Okay,...

5:15 now. The school has long ago emptied of pupils and most of the staff. Are you still with me Lewis? Remember, we have been this way before. Only management remains, and me. And I presume Rebecca, or at least a version of her, somewhere. I'm sitting alone at my desk, eyes resting in the warm dark sanctuary of my palms. I'm waiting for her, waiting for the scent of Chanel No. 5 to invade my senses. I am waiting to explore her again, from the beginning, knowing what I already know about her.

There.

She's here now.

I take a breath and open my eyes to find her sitting across the desk from me. She's watching, like one might watch a fish in a tank, with a quiet curiosity. She has a slightly cross-eyed focus, which lends her a peculiar intensity. I give a start - because even this second time around it shocks me - and I yank the buds from my ears

I'm embarrassed, yes, also beginning to sweat a little on account of it. This is truly fascinating, Lewis, and still curiously portentous. But what to say? Do my next words take our future off down yet another a different path. Or is this not what I think? Is this actually just another form of lucid dreaming? And how would I know the difference anyway?

Let her speak, you fool!

She says: "How best to put this, Tim? If I told you we've both been this way before, what would you say?"

No, she didn't say that. I recall I told her something about resting my eyes and she went on about my 'phone and Facebook or something. But we have not tipped our phones up to the school office this time. In this reality, each member of staff keeps an old spare 'phone, and tips that up to the office of a morning as a decoy, while keeping our real ones concealed.

Why did we not think of that before?

Except she's testing you, Timothy. It's obvious from what she says she's not the Rebecca you've only just met. Not the Rebecca who is not yet your lover. Sorry about the double negatives. I mean, this Rebecca already knows me. She followed me through, and is checking to see if she's on target.

What to say, take a risk: "Em,... would that mean you're still a virgin?"

She smiles. Blushes. "Typical! Technically, I suppose. Yes."

"And the limp?"

"No, I've been putting that on. Anyway you said you said you wouldn't."

"Wouldn't what?"

"Jump." She underlines the word with a flash of her eyes, uses it accusingly.

I must be dreaming this, I must.

"I,... I felt I had no choice."

"Oh? From not wanting to know the solution to Emma's cyper, to sitting here this evening, that's quite a journey."

"I know – I'm sorry. I was afraid of Emma. She spelled it all out

for me, the key, I mean. She was insistent, hinting of other things to come. I didn't want to know, so I jumped to escape her. Why I ended up here, I don't know."

She looks away, thoughtful for a moment, sighs in forgiveness. "I guessed," she says. "I saw you with her, saw the moment you jumped. You were both still there, but it was like the light had gone out of you. I was afraid I'd lose you, so I followed."

"But,.. you were holding prayers for the world. Won't you be missed?"

"I rather hope I'm still there, that I'll catch up with myself at some point later on. One cannot simply blink out of existence, after all. It would be a paradox, would it not? A break in the coherence of our line in time,... or something." She smiles, self deprecating. “Listen to me,... I already sound like a time traveller.”

“I,... wasn’t going to settle in here. I was just hiding out for a bit, avoiding Emma. I was going to come back.”

"You’d better. Anyway, I thought I’d make sure of it, and fetch you back with me."

"How did you know where to find me?"

"Asking things of the dream while we dream works wonders, Timothy."

Doesn't it just!"

"Odd," she says.

"Odd?"

"To have knowledge of a thing, but no physical evidence of it ever having happened."

"Such as?"

"Losing my virginity." She laughs. "My future feels very different here. And it's changing all the time, with every breath I take. I *feel* different this time. Tell me, have you accepted Raul's invitation to dinner?"

"Yes. And you?"

"I have. And will you come home with me, afterwards, this time? I mean instead of waving me goodbye from the pavement?"

"All right."

She thinks on this for a moment, then gives me a saucy smile. "Actually, I can't wait that long. Listen, come round to my place on Leyland Lane. It's nearer than your house. We should go there. Right now."

She reaches out and takes my hand, strokes it warmly.

"Miss Rayworth, we hardly know one another. This hardly seems,..."

"Were you going to say *decent*?"

"Actually I was going to say appropriate. I mean, we have a certain responsibility here to the lives of the people we've hijacked."

"Oh give over, Magowan; people fall into bed with far less preamble than this nowadays."

"I suppose they do."

"Perhaps afterwards we should sleep. Skip Raul's party, or at least this version of ourselves should skip it. We should get back to our own future, the one we know, the one we came from."

All right,...

She's not talking about living this life moment by moment, Lewis. Like I said, one cannot jump back in time to revisit every twist and turn along a previous way, because we begin a new line from the moment of entry, as soon as we awaken. Our thoughts, our words, our choices change everything. And the longer we remain here, the more our life changes from its previous course, and the more too our memory of that previous time grows vague, even unbelievable to us, so eventually the line settles down, takes a firmer hold on our being, becomes less contaminated by foreknowledge, more autonomous, more unique. More real.

"In fact," she says. "I've been thinking we need to get back as soon as possible."

But back from what? What exactly have we created here, Lewis?

Clearly, if we return to our former lives we leave this past altered by the presence of two versions of our selves with a foreknowledge of possible future events they could not have known before. What happens to them? They don't just disappear. Such a thing might be acceptable in the dreaming, but not here. Like Rebecca said, it would leave behind a gaping anomaly in the continuum. So, what kind of future does our action spawn for this version of the lives of Timothy Magowan and Rebecca Raworth?

I know, Lewis,...

Confusing isn't it.

Bear with me.

It's stretching my already overstretched faculties, so I do the human thing and focus on the one fact I can get hold of for now: *that it works*; that, as I have always known, the dreaming is the key to *everything*. Do you understand what I'm telling you, here? I'm

passing this on to you, as Emma has passed it on to me, that you might record it: I have gone back a week, to the last Friday of term, as did Rebecca. And this is not a dream; it is an ordinary waking reality, one branching off from an earlier part of our lives. And to get here, all you do is enter the nexus of the dreaming, and ask it of the dream, while you dream that you might wake back to another point in time.

Rebecca is urging us forward again to the line in time we share, and which we ride to a more or less certain annihilation. You might be wondering why we would even consider it. All time lines end in death of course, but some last longer than others, and there seems nothing more insulting to the ego, that one's time be short. Understandably there is a resistance to it.

So, here's what I'm thinking: when I enter the dreaming again, tonight, why not go back even further? I can go *way back*. I can dial up Rebecca in her teens, in her twenties, in her thirties. I know enough about her now to find her anywhere in time. It does not matter that I forget my future, the future that brought me here. It does not matter that I forget how I jumped back, so I can no longer regain my older self. After all, who'd want to, given what we know of how that works out?

What's that Lewis? *You don't like my attitude?*

Have you discovered a moral side to your nature?

Well, for sure this is an inferior part of my psyche that's speaking to you now, a part that wants only to save its skin, as I knew it would, a part that is thinking only of enjoying sex with Rebecca for all eternity. But even I can see that such a thing is shallow, that we would tire of it.

And what then?

Rebecca is shaking my arm: "Tim? Tim? What are you thinking?"

"Em,... I'm thinking,... there's,.... something we should do before we go back."

"Oh?"

"Can there not be at least one version of ourselves together, with a better chance of surviving all of this? I mean, where's the harm in that?"

"And how do you propose we go about it?"

"On the way over to your place we call at the travel agents and book ourselves on a flight to Australia, with the intention of leaving tomorrow, long before the chaos sets in. And in the morning these

alternate selves of ours wake up with that future, and an already fading knowledge of ours."

"And what about us?"

"We'll already be long gone, back to where we belong, wherever that is. Back to where our line in time makes sense."

She smiles, nods her permission. "Give birth to hope? That's a lovely idea, Tim. Let's do it. But if only any of this could be made to make sense!"

That's settled then. And for now we have this evening to enjoy the fruits of our travels in time. I'm thinking it'll give Raul and Dora a shock, when they find the blind-daters they've set up have already been abed, and are planning the impulsive trip of a lifetime.

After that we sleep, and we go back to where we came from.

Or at least to where we belong.

Maybe.

Chapter 54

So,... Rebecca's flat on Leyland Lane; scent of Chanel and Lavender; something bleachy from a well scrubbed bathroom; purr of water against the porcelain as she powders her nose. Making love in this line of time felt different. It made me realise how every passing moment brings change, that it can change the entire course of a life. It's obvious when you think about it, but less obvious is how profound a thing this truly is.

I pull back the covers on my nakedness, skin still wet with Rebecca's honey, a pair of delicate Perli pants tangled upon my sex where she, laughing, has hung them. Used condoms: two, wriggling about the covers, another worn in hope more than expectation, but a bridge too far at my age. I pride myself, however, on having managed to keep myself firm, that Rebecca could then make her pugnacious best of it. And her best, I note, as I snap the thing away, has left me feeling a little raw.

The use of contraception is superfluous, I know, at least when based upon the rules of my other reality, but it's best not to take any chances. It's possible I may not fire blanks here, therefore one's sense of responsibility must widen with one's knowledge of the greater dimensions of life.

How was it?

Bright, flirty, sparkly, fun,... same as it always is with Rebecca, but also a cool freshness, and an excitement, like the first time all over again, which I suppose it is, this time around. Yet it is a first time that has gained the sparkle of a knowledge of all the other first-times that preceded it.

Remarkable.

Can I not do it, Lewis?

Do what?

Can I not find her in her teens? In her twenties? Find her as a dancer, as a seminarian? Surely some part of her will know me. Surely, that we have met in the nexus of the dreaming will bind us across all time-lines, for there is only the *one* dreaming, isn't there?

In truth I do not know, but fear losing her in the noise of this uncertainty. The only place I can be sure of knowing her like this, right up to the end, is a place where that end will not be long in coming, now.

We have booked a flight out of Manchester for tomorrow evening, ostensibly a two week holiday in Sidney. Last minute deal, and much reduced. This time next week, our combined life savings will not even come close to paying for it. A part of me is looking forward to the trip, and it confuses me that the part of me I am, elsewhere, will not remember any of it. It also gives me an inappropriate feeling of power, this creator of lives, indeed of universes. But then we all do this. All of the time. There is nothing special in it.

In an hour we'll be showered and changed, and sitting down to cottage pie with Raul and Dora. But for all the soap we shall have lathered on our skins, we will still be scented of one another, a scent we will have trailed from the more intimate air of our futures - a different future than the one we'll shortly leave behind.

And Dora will know it.

And the knowledge of it will change her future, and Raul's, but so long as they get on that plane to Durban, it doesn't matter.

You see how every encounter sends out ripples in time, and changes other lives, Lewis? Even choosing not to say good morning to someone can be the beat of the butterfly's wing that sparks the storm, or quells it. The meaning of our lives is very much in the small things, do you see?

It's all a question of the multi dimension nature of it. In the times one, two and three.

Rebecca returns, radiantly naked, her hair wild with a sweated love, eyes bright and wide. "Do you think we could do it again?" she asks.

I feel a flutter of panic. "I'll be struggling to be honest. I think you've given me blisters, and anyway,... em,...we've not long before we're due at Raul's."

She rolls her eyes. "Not *that*, you dummy! I mean go back *further*."

"In time? But I thought you wanted to get back to where we belong."

"I do,... I was just playing with the possibilities, you know? I mean for argument's sake."

"Well, for argument's sake, where would you go back to next?"

"A year, say. How about my first week at the school? Monday lunchtime?"

"Why, what happened then?"

She perches upon the bed and sighs in dreamy reminiscence. "You were in the staff room. No one was sitting near you because you looked like such a scowly old grump. But I was going to sit with you, going to ask if you minded, because I'd already said to myself, I bet old Magowan there is actually quite a cute and interesting man underneath that prickly exterior."

"Well, why didn't you?"

"I lost my nerve. But what if, next time, I don't lose it? What if next time we do sit together, with this knowledge of a possible future and a whole year ahead of us?

"It would be dangerous, Rebecca."

"You're always saying that. Why so?"

"Because this is just a short hop back in time, which means it's also a short hop forward again to where we came from. If I met you a year ago, I'd like to think we'd be pretty much inseparable by now, and I wouldn't want to leave that behind. I'd want to stay with it, follow that life through every groove, every ripple, explore every bit it, and you, in ways I shan't be allowed the time to in our other life."

"Oh, Tim,... you say the sweetest things. But we shall always have that life together. And every life we can conceivably imagine. This is the miracle of it."

"Except *we* are the only travellers in time here, Rebecca. We alone have this unique perspective. Every other version of ourselves will be oblivious of it, and may never discover the secret as we have."

But why wont we, Timothy?

Emma? Is that you? Leave me a lone dammit!

All right, this couple we're sending off to take their chances in Australia, tomorrow,.... will they wake up, wondering at the impulse that drove them, or will they still remember the selves they were, the selves they still are, in part, and which, in equal part, we are now? Or will their first dreams rob them of their knowledge of us, their alternate selves living out another life, in another line of time? Why light us up this way, only to deny us the opportunity of making use of the potential?

All of this is still amazing to me, Lewis. Yes, there are dangers in but also such an incredible potential. Sure, the danger is that in having the ability to navigate back to any day in your life you'll simply choose to avoid the days when you felt pain. And who's to

say those days are not the most important in shaping your life for the better?

And the potential? The potential is that we might become the shepherd of so many strands of our own life, directing the various bits of our selves towards the bits from which we might learn and grow, steering ourselves from the bits that would corrupt us.

I think of the tree of my life, now, and my newly invented self as the gardener with the pruning shears, snipping back to the most promising of buds, and cutting out the wood that's dead. But I need more skill if all my lines in time are to flourish at their best as this one seems on the cusp of doing - or rather the life I have come from. To be sure, it seems perverse I shall never acquire that skill, now, in this time-line. Pray then the couple we have interrupted here will retain our insight, and take it forward,... for all of us.

Why else would Emma force this upon me, if my fate was merely to perish?

Did she force it?

Yes, Lewis, she did!

"Perhaps the knowledge itself is enough," says Rebecca. "I mean, waking up to it is one's purpose, and once it's done there's no point in hanging around any longer. Our line is complete. It’s over. While others aren't. When our whole tree lights up, maybe that's when we no longer have to return to an ordinary waking reality."

"Is that what Emma's doing, then? I mean, consciously living all those versions of her life? In some she catches typhoid in Bombay and dies of it. She know she does. The typhoid of 1840's Bombay is to her like that asteroid is to us. But she's still exploring her life. In some she dies in her thirties, but I've met her as she dreams in her forties. Does she mean for us to do the same? That we're aware in this life means we can enlighten ourselves in others."

Rebecca thinks on this a while. "The odds of catching typhoid in a place like Bombay, in those days, must have been pretty high, but avoidable by jumping back a few weeks and finding the lines in time where you didn't catch it. And you wouldn't need to venture too far back into the flatter parts of the Gaussian curve to find them. She's given us a way out, Tim. I can see that, but the difference with us is all the roads from our recent past are short ones, and I don't want to spend eternity cycling back a week or so all the time just to avoid this one event. Sooner or later we're going to have to face it."

I know this.

August 17th, this year, *this one year*.

Fuck.

It will always be the furthest we can travel out together from our recent past.

"Then we should go further back," I tell her.

"And risk not knowing each other?"

"We knew each other at school, briefly. Maybe we can carry sufficient memory back - that in another life we were once important to each other - and that will influence our future, bring us together again. You followed me here. Why can't you follow me back to our childhood? Middleton C of E Primary school. 1971. Playtime. You give me a stick of Wriggleys and we play hopscotch."

"And live happily ever after? Come on Tim, we were kids. We're not masters of our own fate at that age. I'll go to St Aidens and forget all about you. And you'll forget all about me."

"A year then, like you said. Maybe a year's enough. Find me in the staffroom looking all scowly and stern and just,... wink at me,... then know it's you. I mean *this* you, the you I'm travelling through time with. We'll pick it up from there."

"But it will never be like this, Tim."

"I don't know. Why can't it?"

She gathers me to her and I feel the deep heated softness of her body, feel myself sinking into it, feel myself overwhelmed by a sense of belonging.

To *her*.

"I love you so much," she says."I can never say how perfect all of this is for me. Truly. To be with you, like this. And thought all possibility of that had passed me by. How can I risk losing it?"

"Lose it, or have so little time left to enjoy it. Not much of a choice, Rebecca."

"I know but,... you'll hold my hand, when the time comes?"

"Yes,... yes of course I will."

Tears now.

Are we crying Lewis? Yes, and wiping away each other's tears before they scald too much. We have at least tonight in the setting out of this new line of time, before the dreaming calls us back. We brighten, then laugh.

We shall make the most of it.

So,...

Showered now, Rebecca pulls on a crumpled summer frock. She wears no underwear, wore none that previous version of this night, I suppose, and the realisation sparks in me a belated flowering of retroactive lust that strains my blisters. Her stick lies in a corner of the living room, but she ignores it. Raul and Dora will notice, and they will comment upon the lack of it, but Rebecca has resolved not to pretend lameness in life any more, in this life, or any other.

It is another reminder that this is not an older line in time we are travelling, but one we invented anew the moment we woke into it. Also, unlike that previous night, we travel out to Raul's house together, walk the garden path with the joined up pace of lovers who are familiar with one another's limbs, creating whole new probabilities with every turn and every glance. Already Emma's notebook seems a long way in the future, a figment of imagination, something that might not even be real - something I dreamed, perhaps? Perhaps also it would be better if I did not encounter it again. Perhaps in this line of time I shall not.

Then stay, Timothy. Get on that plane with Rebecca tomorrow. And ride it into the future. One you can share.

I can't. We have a duty to fulfil!

A duty?

Peculiar thought, Timothy.

Oh, how assertively Ego rises to deny the reality of the nexus of the dreaming. How tenaciously it fixes upon these fresh surroundings, like an anchor, settles us in, deep, whispers in our ears that all thoughts of travelling in time are mere inventions of an overactive imagination - so why trouble the dreaming self with it? Sleep, it says, and wake back here once more,...

It'll be hard to leave here tonight.

Then don't.

Stay!

Chapter 55

As I lift my hand to knock I realise my father's watch is back upon my wrist. Quickly I unbuckle it and hand it to Rebecca. She exchanges it for the cross. We bumble. It is a Laurel and Hardy moment. Neither of us knows if this ritual is still significant here, or if we are already so entwined it makes no difference any more.

Clearly though neither of us wants to take the chance.

We must retain the magic in our lives.

Or our lives mean nothing.

Raul answers with a welcoming smile. He's dressed in grey flannels and a conventional shirt, clean white and pressed, like any regular guy. His expression drains to a semi-pained confusion when he see us together - but only for a moment.

"Ah,... my little subterfuge is exposed," he says. "How clever of you to guess it."

"I blabbed," says Rebecca. "To his credit, Old Magowan here was not for backing out, and has kindly agreed to drive me home afterwards, that is after I have drunk myself under your table."

She says this, I think, to spike his guns later on, defuse his ribbing and his double-entendres.

Nice one, Rebecca!

Rauls face brightens, already on the scent of fresh possibilities. "Well, that's splendid. Indeed, that's Timothy to a tee,... quite the gentleman. And a word of advice if I may,..." he lowers his tone to a stage whisper."His taste in coffee, when he drops you off, is very refined, or so the rumours have it. He is strictly the flavour of ground coffee grains, time taken in their preparation. None of your cheap instant stuff, eh Timothy?."

It seems she has not quite succeeded in heading him off, but Rebecca has not finished: She winks and returns in her own stage whisper: "But he's already had coffee at my place, Raul. Much hotter and stronger than he'd imagined, I'm sure. His blisters may prevent him asking for more tonight, though I hope he will have healed sufficiently by then to attempt at least a delicate sip of nectar from my golden chalice."

Raul is nonplussed, wondering if he has read the flowery innuendo correctly, as do I, or if we are making up our own. We have the advantage on him now, and though I love this man, it feels

good to be a little more in control of his Puckishness.

"Sorry," he says. "You've completely wrong footed me." He recovers himself with a laugh. "But come in, both of you. And welcome."

He slaps me heartily on the back, brows raised at my unexpected audacity in making so bold with Rebecca, and more to the point, having said nothing about it. But I'm not thinking of this. I'm thinking a part of him might be dead in a few weeks. Harder to imagine a part of me might be too.

So, we are standing before the painting of Amelia Grey again, Rebecca and I, and I am wondering if she will take a photograph of it this time, and if she does how that will affect the changes in our lives further down the line. Surely some things can have little effect on what happens next.

Does it matter if I scratch my ear, or not?

Focus Timothy, you have two lives to live now, and must not confuse them.

It's the same fine, warm evening in late July. We eat outside at the sun-bleached, hardwood table. I'd wondered if it might rain this time, for late July can be an unsettled month. The air feels a touch cooler, and the western sky is banked with cloud, unlike before. It is still a comfortable evening, but the atmosphere is different. Nature does not work to a regular timetable across all realities. It seems the slightest thing can change the weather, or deflect an asteroid.

Bees buzz lazily among the starry heads of cream and red honeysuckle. Their monotonic meanderings remind me of Strickland's lecture that morning, but only because I'm aware I was reminded of it before, and thus the future is changing again, feeding back on itself. I can read it in the conversation, which is different now. Raul does not tease Rebecca for having succumbed to the suit. Instead he remarks that we both seem a little dreamy this evening, that my cynicism is blunted, and Rebecca's pugnaciousness rather more mellow than he is used to.

She flicks back her hair and pulls off her glasses. Her eyes are hazel and liquid and very beautiful. She did this before I recall, and I am similarly struck by them now. She forgets herself, reaches out, places her hand on top of mine and sighs a deep sigh of contentment.

Raul observes. "So,... how long have you two been,..."

"Oh, in one sense, only since this evening," she says. "In another,

for a little over a week. But however you define it Raul, we've been coming to it many times over, I think."

Many times over?

This makes sense to us, but how do Raul and Dora interpret it? Do they mis-hear and, as with all myths, convert their interpretation into something else they can understand, something personally meaningful? Or do they assume Rebecca is merely a little worse for wine and falling over her words?

I can't remember what we talked of last time - Strickland no doubt and the business of the suits. Then there was the possibility of early retirement and teaching,... because get more than two teachers in a room, Lewis, and they will speak only of teaching to the exclusion of all else. And all of that seems unbearably trivial now. None of it was important. We could not see through the fog of our words, that what was important was the moment; it was ourselves gathered around that table, dusk approaching and the simple sweetness of just *being*.

Such is the malaise of the western world, Raul.

You asked me once to cure it.

But there is no cure for the ills of the material world from within the material world. We must seek our solution in what lies beyond it.

Emma?

Be calm, Timothy, darling, we'd be better if we could simply chill out and sense the aliveness in every moment.

There are whole universes in it.

We talk of other things now; small talk; each of us skirting around the sensed fact that two of us are inexplicably intruding from another place. The dusk drains slowly to dark and the photoelectric twinkle-lights come on like fireflies to dot the night. Raul burns Citronella candles to keep the midges at bay. I am easy with Raul and Dora, with Rebecca too, of course.

Only now do I know why.

We are brothers and sisters across many versions of our lives.

Raul brings up the subject of Durban and extends his impulsive and somewhat Puckish invitation again. This time we blush, and admit our last minute booking of a package holiday to Australia. Raul is surprised, also happy I am not, for once, disappearing into monkish retreat at the cabin. Already I am living this role, even forgetting for a moment the reason we are going to Australia. I am shuttering myself away from questions like what it will be like to

live in a half obliterated world. In this time line such fears are as yet mere fancies, and precognition is a half formed thing that perhaps should not be read too literally.

Raul jokes that it is as well to be having one last fling, since the world will be ending soon.

What?

How does he know?

Ah, I had forgotten, half-hearted rumours were already leaking into news bulletins by this time. I recall I did not take them seriously either.

"I think you'll be okay, Raul," I tell him. "I have it on good authority that northern Europe will be the point of impact. Anywhere south of the equator should survive in some way shape or form."

"But only the poorest and most underdeveloped of countries," says Rebecca.

And why so, I ask, surprised?

Raul nods in understanding. "Because they have been managing on nothing for a long time already, my friend. But I'm not sure those are the kinds of conditions we fat westerners can adapt to. For sure we shall die out - if not in the impact, then in sheer despair at the chaos that follows it, and having nowhere to charge our devices."

"No sense in digging for gold," says Dora, "When a handful of rice is worth so much more."

We laugh, because all of it is idle speculation. Only Rebecca and I exchange a meaningful glance. There is hope then. Her insight is true. How typical of the western mentality to judge humanity by its own concepts, and reject anything that falls short of our expected luxuries as being even remotely acceptable. But there are other ways of living and being. None of this will be of any comfort to you, Lewis, as the world you preside over is for certain to be annihilated. If you are to survive you must dig very deep my friend, for what is humble in yourself. And if you survive what's coming such humility shall be your only gain. All else will be taken from you.

I am wondering now how many times we have sat in this garden, on this night, and how many topics of conversation we might have explored, what insights we have each gleaned and fed back into the multi-dimensioned matrix of our lives. Raul would not complain about the way his life has turned out, but it has been a hard road for him, and not one I think he would be happy to learn

of himself ever repeating. Yet his birth in the strife torn nations of the world dictates the probability of much that he has already suffered. It is enough he remembers this road only once, no matter how many times he has travelled it for real.

I resolve not to enlighten him.

It seems cruel.

By contrast I have led an easy life. Suffered little. Mine is not the hero's path, Lewis, not the path of greatness. My tree is the willow; it is soft, pliable. His is the oak, forever rooted in the wild and windy places of the earth, where strength is more severely tested.

I realise, in this world, as in the last, we will never see Raul or Dora again. The realisation casts a sudden pall of melancholy over the evening. When Rebecca and I eventually take our leave, it makes me embrace them both with an uncharacteristic intensity, so that I see them exchange a surprised glance. They assume perhaps it is my new found intimacy with Rebecca that has weakened my reserve, rendered me more,... tactile.

We drive back to Rebecca's flat, both of us a little dizzy, viewing our lives from this higher perspective. I'm trying to close myself in a little now, narrow my experience so it is equally applicable to both this life, and the other I have come from. The hushed interior of a car, familiar roads, and later,... the darkness of a bedroom, and a woman laying down beside me. These are the things we should treasure, Lewis.

The insignificant things.

The things that are the same no matter which time-line we travel.

I look at Rebecca now, lost in reverie. "I thought you were going to ask him to paint us nude?"

"I did. He nearly choked. He says he'll do it."

"Ah! Then you only asked him because you know,... I mean,... that we'll probably never see them again."

"Oh, Tim, they will always be a part of our lives. But you're right. And thinking about it, I would be embarrassed. Tell me, what is the fashion for nudity these days? Do women still prefer those Brazilian wax things?"

"I don't know. It's a long time since I was a connoisseur of,... all that,.."

"Perhaps I should get one anyway. But I always thought they looked silly. What about Miranda?"

"My ex?"

I'm blushing, now, and I'm sorry for this sudden tangent, but Rebecca is enjoying it, and that makes me blush even more. "She didn't bother much. I mean in that department."

"Like me then. Perhaps if I got that tattoo I'd always wanted I wouldn't feel so nude."

"But we should never fear to be naked, Rebecca."

She pats my arm. "How wise you are, Timothy. I shall simply shave it all off then. Unless,..."

“Unless?”

“You would prefer to shave it for me?”

Our fate then is the dreaming, but not death, for we do not die, Lewis. And if we should have regrets it is that we did not do everything we could to make our line in time a more fertile place for other lines to branch from.

And in the dreaming?

What then?

If tales of the summerland are anything to go by, it's an experience worth looking forward to, but I'm not sure what qualities of psyche are necessary for a permanent residence there. Certainly without the limits imposed by a material existence I would dissolve into nothingness. Eventually, I think we are all tempted back out into the branches of our ordinary waking lives again. My only fear is the same as that of every other human being, that I will lose my self-knowledge. This will spare me the pain, of course, should I lose all knowledge Rebecca, but that will not lessen the tragedy of it.

She drops her hand into my lap, disturbing my reverie. "Back to the cabin then?"

"Yes."

"And you'll make love to me before we dream?"

"Okay, but it will have to be gently. I would prefer, if you don't mind, to,... how did you put it? *Sip delicately of your golden chalice*."

"Well,... you'll hear no complaints from me on that one, darling."

It's a pity we were never young together, that we knew each other only briefly, and in passing, as children. A pity we have to come lately to one another, at a time when probabilities collapse into one more or less certain outcome.

Then go back and create the opportunity! Be twenty five again, Timothy, and find her. Find the dancer in her, before the damage was done?

No.

And Why not?

Because without the damage, Rebecca would not be the Rebecca I know, and none of this would mean anything.

A damaged life, does not mean a ruined one.

Chapter 56

Breakfast now, at the cabin. Fresh orange juice and a mixed tinned fruit with what appears to be the last of the vanilla yoghurt. I have saved a small bowl for Rebecca and am just finishing mine when she shuffles into the kitchen. My memory of last night is vague, but firming up now, especially when I see her face, and remember its sweetness in the half light of her bedroom in Leyland as we made love.

She sits, glances out of the window and says: "Oh!", her mouth remaining fixed for a moment, a neat round "O". Then she looks at me, wondering if I am aware of it too. "Are you awake, Tim?" she asks.

"Yes, thank you."

But what she means is: am I lucid?

It's a false awakening, Lewis, back to the dreaming, to the cabin of our dreaming selves, the cabin of the lake, a lake which now has about it a stillness and a mirror-blackness reflecting a fiery ochre dawn.

"Just go with it," I tell her. "It makes sense."

She rolls her eyes. "How does any of this make sense?"

"We can only travel from one waking reality to another through the nexus of the dreaming. That's how we went back in time. We were wrong to thing we could go to sleep in one waking reality and simply wake up in another."

"All right, put like that it does make a kind of sense. So we'll ask it of the dream again, tonight, while we're here." She flicks the kettle on and inspects the coffee jar, wrinkles her nose that we seem to be getting down on caffeine, then has a thought: "Might we also ask it of the dream, do you think, to wind things *forward* to the seventeenth?"

"Skip to the end of the line? Are you really so bored with me as that?"

She laughs, but a part of her is serious. "We should get it over with, perhaps. We should cut out the remaining days. We're spending most of them dreaming or time travelling anyway and I'm more or less convinced that's how we'll go on. I mean, afterwards."

"You're serious?"

"If the universe is infinite and timeless, then surely everything

that can happen is already happing. We're just wasting time counting down here, when we could be getting on with things."

I take her point, but if what she's saying is true, there's also nothing to stop us from jumping further, to a future, say on the 18th, one where we're still together, and where the asteroid has merely grazed the earth's atmosphere. We simply ask it of the dream, and it searches the branches of our life's tree for the most closely fitting reality.

It's strange, I remember not so long ago how I resisted this knowledge, yet now I'm already pushing the boundaries of what I did not want to know. Some aspects of human nature remain the same, Lewis, no matter where we find ourselves. We are, above all, a very adaptable species. And it seems even Armageddon presents its opportunities.

"But is that how it works, Rebecca? Has everything that can possibly happen in our lives already happened? I know there's an infinite potential, but that doesn't mean we've explored each and every avenue. We might be stuck, looping endlessly, living the same or similar lives over and over. Even given an infinite potential, we might only have discovered a fraction of what we're capable of."

She settles at the table with coffee. "Okay, plus if we have no memory of a thing, how can we precisely define it when we ask it of the dreaming to take us there?"

"Good point."

We feel like we’re getting a handle on things, that this time travelling is simple, once you know how it works. But all of this is speculation Lewis. All we know for sure is that it's possible to travel *back* in time and begin a new branch of life from any remembered point in our personal history. And I suppose we could ride that branch to a date beyond the one we originally departed from, then jump back from there to where we started, so bringing with us memories of a possible future life, all be it one already lived in another version of reality. That would gives us something to aim for when asking the dream to carry us there again. This must be how Emma does it, how she travels out beyond her own deaths - victim of typhoid in the early days of Bombay.

But having already found a way past the impact, why would we ever want to travel back in order to use our knowledge of the future to escape it again? We might as well just stay where we are.

Or wake up and see it coming.

"I don't know. Rebecca. I don't know what to do. All I know is we have a period to spend in the dreaming now, and a decision to make. A decision I thought we'd already made."

"But how do we know that's the right decision?"

"We don't. We don't know anything."

"All right. Let's try to think this one through,..."

"I don't think we can. Not consciously. We need advice,..."

"You want to talk to Emma?"

"No,... Emma terrifies me right now - I was thinking more along the lines of idle gossip,... we should go talk to some Daemons."

"Won't they just tell us what we want to hear?"

"No,.. not always. Sometimes they tell us what we don't want to hear as well."

"So,... what do you suggest."

"I suggest that if we went for a walk by the lake that sooner or later we'd be likely to come across a little wayside café. That's a good entry point. We'd be sure to find all manner of Daemons in there."

"Okay. A walk sounds nice. But no gloomy thoughts, Okay? I like the sunshine, and want to brown my skin."

"I'll try."

So,...

Rebecca wears a yellow bikini under a translucent, azure sarong. She has reduced her age to about twenty five. Her thighs and her calves are as shapely and muscular as one would expect of a dancer, and she has adorned the space between her shoulders with a little Celtic tattoo - appropriately enough, the tree of life. For myself, I have remained on the cusp of fifty, because it is an age that interests me; the body changes, the hair recedes and erases all justification for vanity; the libido also retreats to less troublesome proportions. This of course means Rebecca now resembles my daughter, or an over-young lover.

It amuses her.

We have walked a while by the lake, along a newly laid gravel path, in and out of secret coves, pine-scented and lovely, and just as we are ready for it, a waterside café appears - a continental café du lac where they do service in the proper way. The babble of gentle conversation reaches us from across the water.

"I smell chips," says Rebecca. "And I'm starving."

"You must be careful of your new figure."

"Are you telling me you'll no longer love me if I'm fat? I can arrange it you know? I'd not taken you for such a narrow minded misogynist. Do you objectify women like this all the time?"

"Rebecca, you have only been twenty five for the morning. You were forty five when I met and fell in love with you. And anyway, do you not objectify yourself, fashion yourself a form you believe to be attractive,... to men?"

"Fair point,... I shall refrain from punishing you, but only while I think about it, okay?"

"Okay."

"And Tim?"

"Hmm?"

"Did you mean it when you said you were in love with me?"

"Yes."

"That's nice. Tell me again when we wake up, will you?"

"If I remember."

I'm worried for a moment we shall not find a seat, that this is just like any other café in a popular district around lunch time, but of course there is the perfect table, overlooking the water, a smartly uniformed waitress appearing instantly and with a smile, to guide us to it.

"It'll anchor you, of course," she says - the waitress, I mean.

Rebecca and I enquire simultaneously: "Oh?"

She presents us with menus: "Your fascination with form. It means you will return to it, but don't worry, it's when we expect those forms to be imperishable that we're in trouble."

I know better than to ask if she is real or imagined. It goes against the etiquette of the dreaming. Instead, I thank her, order a glass of chilled wine for Rebecca, coffee for me, then consult the menu. There is an endless choice, but my eyes light upon the one thing that takes my fancy: Grilled trout on toast. And why not, Lewis? It's perfectly plausible. Rebecca goes for a plain omelette and with a sharp look in my direction, orders a basket of chips on the side.

"I challenge you to say you love me," she says. "I mean in ordinary waking reality. And mean it."

"That I love you in waking reality is by now I think self evident, but to be pedantic, which, as you've already pointed out, most dusty old English teachers, myself included, are, what I said was is that I am *in* love with you, which is subtly different and more meaningful

I think. And yes I *shall* say it. I shall shout it from the fell tops, as soon as we're awake."

"All right." She blushes, then looks around, tries to read the crowd. "Ah! This is promising," she says. "Do you recognise the gentleman sitting over there?"

Indeed I do. I'm familiar enough with his various portraits to recognise William Wordsworth, aged about seventy. He has a fine, long nose and white hair. There's something sparkly about his eyes and a quick, light humour about his lips. He's sharing a coffee with an Oriental gentleman who wears a plain white suit in the cut of China's colonial era. He'll be Lao Tsu, I'm thinking. At another table sits Fred Astaire, sharing small talk with Confucius.

Then we have Emerson and Mark Twain.

The dreaming is a strange place when you think back on it from an ordinary waking perspective, Lewis, but from inside of it, of course, it all makes perfect sense.

Rebecca is smiling at my expression. "As Daemons go, you must admit this is a fairly interesting start. And strangely enough they reflect my own choice of protective entourage."

"Better than the beefcakes I thought you'd go for," I tell her.

"My harem of wise gentlemen would take your girls at chess any day."

"But my girls are good with swords. You didn't summon these gentlemen?"

"No."

"The dream may be influenced by your choices though. We should just go with it and see what happens."

Wordsworth raises his cup and nods a greeting to us both. "We do not see the world as it is," he reminds me, "but as we are."

I feel a tremble inside at this. Fear, Lewis. Fear that we are so close now to the end of our line in time. Rebecca senses it in the clouds that suddenly darken our horizon, and which send a chill wind to ruffle the lake. It raises a murmur of disquiet among the clientèle as menus are swept to the floor and napkins flutter. Rebecca reaches across and takes my hand to steady me. She beams reassurance, and the sunshine returns.

"Remember," she says. "Even if the worst happens, it'll still be all right. *Or do you really think that whatever made us would simply stop trying, Tim*?"

Ah!

Steinbeck.

I'd been thinking we were missing one of her entourage, for there are always seven - or maybe I just make it so by imagining it thus. And Steinbeck is infinitely better than the dog from Hector's house; that would be too surreal, and hard to explain to you with a straight face. But the longer I spend in the dreaming, the more I realise there are no rules, Lewis. Indeed, one can best recognise that which is false only by its resistance to change. Steinbeck makes his entrance, orders coffee, eases himself onto a barstool, and tips his hat in our direction. All is well, he's saying. The world is falling - our world at least - but all is well.

And why?

Because nothing exists.

That's the only way anything can exist at all.

Don't misunderstand me, Lewis. I'm not one of those dope-addled loafers who blathers on claiming none of it is real, that everything is an illusion. All I'm saying to you is reality is not what we think it is. Look at your hands - do it now. They look solid enough, don't they? But they are made of atoms, and atoms are mostly space. To all intents and purposes then, there is nothing there at all.

Lao Tsu takes his leave of Wordsworth and joins Steinbeck at the bar. They commence a game of ‘go’ while sharing tinctures of green tea, stiffened with vodka and served in an endless line of shot glasses. This is becoming more dream topsy-turvy, and I'm in danger of losing it. Wordsworth lifts his brows, querying permission to join us. We assent, and he moves to our table, an elegant gentleman, now sitting comfortably before us.

The dream settles, focuses once more.

He offers a polite smile.

Rebecca is blushing, feeling herself suddenly under-dressed to be entertaining a distinguished Victorian man of letters. The next time I look she wears the vestments of the priesthood.

"Hello William," she says.

It's interesting how she armours herself with the robes of office, but she's perhaps also forgetting Wordsworth might find the concept of a lady vicar more shocking than conversing with a lady wearing even less than what in his day constituted her under-things. To his credit, he feigns not to have noticed. Instead he nods; then there follows an awkward silence while we read the dream.

"Would you ask me something?" he says. "Or shall we merely pass the time?"

Rebecca thinks on this for a moment. "It's not like one of those genie things is it," she asks. "I mean a three wishes sort of thing?"

He smiles at this, apparently charmed by her wit. He shakes his head but all without breaking his sagely calm. Rebecca takes a breath. "Then, can I ask,... does the world really end on Wednesday?"

I admire her directness in this, but I'm not sure if he will answer - nor if he is even capable of answering. I watch their exchange, fascinated. He appears to be thinking of his reply and in the end his own directness gives at least the illusion of matching hers:

"Most certainly it will," he replies, and I'm impressed by this, but then he softens his line to something more inscrutable by adding: "If it's what you want."

We are both puzzled now, Rebecca also a little exasperated and she comes back at him directly, like a mother quizzing an incoherent child. "But neither of us *want* it, William. Obviously."

He gathers himself, perhaps sensitive to Rebecca's pugnacious humour, which can come across as abrasive if you do not know her. And this is strange because if he does not know her, it grants him more autonomy than I have given him credit for. He's wondering perhaps how best to spare our feelings, but decides once more on bluntness: "I think you *do* want it," he says. "And why? Because you have lost faith in your world, and your places in it. You have found openings in time, peeled back the curtain on new worlds, fresh lives, and are already preparing to leave behind the one you know."

There is a resonance here. I feel it as a twist of panic that he might be right. We'd talked so confidently about returning to face the asteroid, about holding hands by the tarn and embracing as it hit. And then we were talking of asking the dreaming to deliver us beyond it, to a time when it had already missed.

"But how can that be,... sir?"

I add the sir as a mark of respect, not that believe I am addressing Wordsworth himself - not his spirit anyway - that would be too simplistic, but in all our dealings with the daemonic, one must tread lightly and give no reason for offence.

"It's no more than I have done myself, Timothy," he replies. There is a wistful look about him now, and I'm reminded of the tragedies of Wordsworth's life. For one who rendered such a

worshipful service to the nature of being, his life dealt him one poor hand after the other. But therein might lie the source of his genius. Had he been able to avoid all hardship, would he have become the man we celebrate today? Ah,... there's a minor revelation in that, but I don't know if it's significant here, or merely a tempting little aside on which to escape the deeper question.

"But lately, William," I tell him, "I'd been thinking to engage more with the world. Buy an old bookshop, teach dreaming, meditation. Is it too late for that, do you think?"

This sounds weak, I know, and I am ashamed it is the best I can offer both to him, now, and to the world.

"It depends if you mean it," he says. "Are you telling me you still have an interest in the future of things? Would you save it, Timothy? What about you Rebecca? Without an interest in the world, and our benign wishes, how can it not end, since it is through our own hearts we sustain it?"

"I think we would save it," I tell him, but I don't know if I really mean this. "Rebecca has held prayers for the world. As a priestess, and a traveller in the dreaming, she's done more than anyone to spare the world. Of course we would save it"

But Rebecca's not sure. "There's a danger Timothy, that the only use we have left for the world is that we find each other in it. Were it not for that one fact, a darker part of us would be perfectly happy to see it all go to hell. Do you not remember our lives before? They were a litany of conflict with corrupt thought and self seeking authority, an authority that would have torn the tweed from your back, had you wear a box-ticking suit and shafted the living daylights out of us both. Do you not remember how much you wanted to escape it?"

Wordsworth sighs, smiles softly. "You no longer need the world in order to find one another, Rebecca. But tell me, how might you make a difference to the world? How might you change it? Allow me to answer for you: by maintaining faith in the rightness of your desire to be a beacon in the lives of others. What kind of beacon is entirely up to you - teach dreams, Timothy, or teach Literature - whatever is your heart's desire. Teach religious and moral studies, Rebecca, or take up the office of priestess, as you are no doubt capable. But do this only so long as your heart is in it. Should you extinguish the light, turn your back upon the world, then you are already one step beyond it. Is it any surprise we are having this

conversation, given your singular lack of engagement with the world? Is it any surprise you are both so adept at finding your way around in this place already, when you have so clearly lost your way in the other?"

"You flatter us, sir, if you think we are adept at finding our way around." I hesitate to mention that he also insults us by saying we have lost our way in the real world. But how can it be an insult, if it's true? We *have* lost our way. "Rebecca and I are merely biding our time here, and have asked it of the dreaming that we be delivered back to where we belong."

He draws his watch from his waistcoat pocket, draws it slowly on its chain and flicks it open. I note the dial is blank and has no fingers. Such inconsistencies are normal in the dreaming. And they are always meaningful. "But where is it you belong?" he asks."Think carefully upon it before you answer."

"Our own time, of course, a few days before the world ends."

"But is that the right time?"

"It's where we're from, William. " says Rebecca. "And we feel we'd be better spending the days that remain to us in a coherent line of time. And, since there's no escaping our fate,..."

"But is it not your fate simply to live, madam? Is it not your fate to realise the potential of your lives - all your lives? Not passively, but actively? And I think you are both old enough by now to understand that any meaningful transformation does not come from the world itself, or anything, or anyone in it. We must take each world as we find it, while working patiently at the transformation of ourselves from within. Our inner self is the only constant factor in all of this. It is the only thing that means anything. It is the only definition of truth. Authentic. Genuine. Unexpurgated."

"Then we belong?..."

"You do not belong anywhere, Madam. In the ultimate shape of things, geography is a redundant concept, therefore we belong in no other place than wherever we happen to be at the time."

"But what time? And don't try telling me there's no such thing as time?"

"I would not insult you. The time is always *now*. Obviously."

Rebecca and I share a glance, and Wordsworth goes on, poetically: "Ask it not of the dreaming to deliver you to A , B or C. But to wherever it is *right* that you should be."

Now, it's not so much his words as the mood they carry, but we

both feel it now, that twinge of panic, born out of a subliminal resonance and a neurotic resistance to what we each fear is true. We reach for one another's hands, hold them clamped upon the table. We don't care where we end up, so long as we're together, for such is love. But we get the feeling he's telling us this may not always be right, or even possible.

He nods, lends us a knowing smile. "You've seen how malleable reality is. In certain of my times I believed reality to be extant, but ultimately meaningless without the power of imagination to animate it. As imagination wanes, reality remains, but becomes progressively void of any meaning. In short, the world loses its enchantment. Now however, I know there can be no reality at all without imagination, and no meaning in a world that is entirely stripped of its enchantment. But beware: with a certain insight, we can create whatever worlds we like, and be in them with those we love, but that does not make us explorers of the meaning of our lives, nor the shapers of better lives for ourselves or others. We become less the captains of our soul and more like tourists, pleasure seekers, materialists of the fourth dimension and then we shall have no lasting joy, neither of one another, nor of the worlds we discover. In short, my beloved friends, Timothy and Rebecca, we cannot dictate terms of the dreaming and have it all mean something. We cannot solve the problem of our isolation from an isolated position. We can only trust there is a perspective greater than our own, and trust in *it*, submit ourselves to *its* will, and hope for the best."

A sudden gloom takes the sun, and a sharp shower disturbs the calm of the lake - mirror of our thoughts.

"It takes courage to ask it of the dreaming," he goes on, "to deliver us to wherever it is right that we should be, and be accepting of it, even if we know we shall never understand. And that wherever it delivers us on waking, *that* is the place where we belong."

He's talking about letting go, Lewis. He's talking about accepting that, in his terms, and Rebecca's, God moves in mysterious ways. It's the old cop-out that paints a rosy picture of an otherwise club fisted fate. But I take his point and have long accepted anyway that either there is no God, or we have totally misunderstood what God is.

We take our leave of the café and make a gloomy return to the cabin, our mood judged by the showers we must dodge. Rebecca

remains in her priestly suit, draws out a thin cigar and smokes it thoughtfully. We're aware we've been dreaming now for what feels like a very long time, but neither of us is ready to wake, already fearing the dreaming might take the upper hand and deliver us to the one place that is right for us, but one where neither of us wants to go - the place where we are no longer with each other.

We're back to attachment Lewis.

Unless I'm missing something here!

Is the point not more that we should love one another selflessly? Most religions I think are agreed on that, at least on paper. So, surely it must be all right to love Rebecca, as I do, without fearing I'm merely setting myself up for a devastating loss when we are parted. But if we all approached love that way, we would avoid it. We have to accept love for what it is, and not fear its loss, or a true and lasting love will never be won.

Love is the gift of life, Lewis.

And the key to transformation.

Always.

Oh,... this is a hard road. It ends at the void, a fallen tree being the only way across, but I note the path is not picked up on the other side. The other side is an illusion and the path peters out half way across. The meaning in this is clear: we must each step out over the void, plummet to the darkest depths of our selves, and we cannot succeed in that by hanging on to life. We can only do that by letting go.

The apex of the cabin appears through the trees and for once I am not happy to see it. It's softly lit interior speaks of repose, of shelter, of sleep, but to sleep in the dreaming is always the gateway to waking, somewhere in reality, and we would avoid that for now. But the unseen dream-hand holds a steady course for evening, and the coming dark. The sun is past the yard-arm. It is orange and fat and heavy, and sinking, setting the lake on fire. Transition is coming, it's saying, and even in the dreaming there are some things we cannot avoid, or bend to our will.

I note Rosy is still out by the tarn.

Rebecca and I share a glance, read one another's minds. She suggests a drive. It's one way of staying awake, by which I mean asleep - but I don't see how we can possibly sustain this for very much longer. And we have made no affirmation yet, no firm request of the dreaming to deliver us back to the last days of the world, to

that final fall of night.

I have a sense of having left the future as yet undetermined, and if we should wake unprepared, what then? How then shall we find our way? Can we take the risk we shall merely wake back to where we last remember laying our heads? Is the universe so logical as that? At least then we might get on a flight to Australia, but I've a feeling we've already reserved those seats for other versions of our selves and we should not be thinking of going back there again. We must choose another course, choose to pick up again our old lives as they come to the end of the line,...

Or leave it to the dreaming to decide what is right.

We drive a little way down the fell-road, only to have the road open out onto an incongruous beach. It's all white sand and blue-green ocean here. This confuses me, but at least we have gained a little dream-time I think, with the sun now looking about an hour from setting, and a not so sleepy light. We sit on a blanket, gazing out to the horizon, our backs against the camper, seeing nothing but our own thoughts reflected in the gold-tinted roll of the waves. The feeling is one of late season holidays, and we are gathered now on the evening of the last day, ahead of us only a return to something we would sooner avoid.

Feels familiar, Lewis?

She takes my hand, and I read her thoughts through the minute movements of her fingers. There is love, and tenderness, and a voiceless longing.

"This really has been the best holiday ever, Tim."

"Yes,... yes it has."

"And I *love* you."

I find this momentarily stunning. I have always known it of course – that she loves me - but I don't think I've heard her say it with as much matter of fact certainty and emphasis before. It comes at me like waves of warm energy, enfolds me in its sweetness. "I love you too. I'm only sorry,..."

"No. " She presses her fingertips to my lips, shushing me. "No regrets."

You heard her: no, no regrets, Lewis. I mean why should there be regrets? For opening a gate on the dreaming? For having Rebecca follow me through into the past? For seeing what we have seen?

I feel a shiver then. Someone walking over my grave.

"Rebecca?...."

"Hmm?"

"We do have a choice here."

"I was hoping you'd think of one, because I'm desperate for a way out, and time is short."

"If we go back to the cabin, we know we're facing a more or less certain end. But like Wordsworth said, how do we know that's the right time and place for us. Maybe we shouldn't dictate our path any more. Maybe we should simply hand this all up to,...."

"God?"

"If you like."

"And miss the end of the world? But I was kind of looking forward to it."

"How do we know that isn't our fate anyway?"

"All right. Then we'll lay down on this blanket, on the beach, now, prepare ourselves in the way Emma taught us, and ask it of the dreaming to have us waking to whatever life is right for us."

"All right."

At this I feel in the pressure of her hand, a half confident hope. "We'll always be together, Tim, somewhere. We know it because we already are. We're on a flight to Australia and the holiday of a lifetime, or together in any number of other times and places. And these moments are not lost. They can always be returned to, and new branches taken. Always."

I do know that now; I can safely trust in it, I think. But what I don't know is if it will be *this* part of us, the part of us that knows each other as we are. I don't want to lose her as I know her, and she knows me, *now*.

"I'm not perfect," I tell her. "I suffer for want of you. I suffer for wanting to take this knowledge of each other back into waking reality, where we can make use of it."

"I know. But would we make wise use of it? I'm not perfect either, and rather like the idea of being 25 again, any time I choose."

"As long as we don't avoid the difficult things, I'm sure we'll be all right."

She thinks on this, nods. "Okay – even slipping on a wet stage and never walking properly again. But listen, Tim, even as a priestess, I cannot *know* the mind of God. I can only offer up the prayers of people, and in reverse seek to be a channel for the

counsel of God. I don't know how things are going to be for us, exactly, but we must at least give ourselves credit for believing this bit of our lives is right,.... and that we will be together, that we will come together and know each other as we are, now."

Once the disc of the sun grazes the horizon it does not take long for that final speck of light to wink out – but long enough for Rebecca to rummage in Rosy's cupboards for a candle, to set it upright in the sand, and to light it.

"Let it be," she says. "Trust that whatever happens next,... is right."

So, we lay together on the blanket, the man on his left side the woman on her right, and we breathe into the light. Dream yoga in the dreaming, Lewis. Doors within doors. It sounds complicated, but really it's easy, once you get going with it. It is however, very powerful and you must be careful, my friend, for this is the swift winged chariot of the gods.

And remember: we are only men.

My dream takes on the sound of the sea and the feeling of a warm night. At some point Rebecca and I have spooned up, and even through my closed eyes, I know her by her heat and by her scent. Her presence seems constant as I dip in and out of consciousness. Keeping my eyes closed I carry with me the impression of dawn breaking, and of waking with her beside me still.

My spirits lift. It's enough, and I don't care where we are now, nor what point in time we have emerged, because we are together, and with all the giddiness of a teenage love, I know that's all we need and having that one thing enables us to transcend all others. But wait,... the sea is still washing on the shore, a reminder of last night's dream, harbinger of the disturbing suggestion I might not in fact have truly woken up, that I am still dreaming, on the beach. Then someone is touching my arm and I open my eyes to see Emma crouched in the sand, looking tenderly down.

"You've been avoiding me," she says.

I turn to Rebecca but she's no longer there.

Chapter 57

So,...

Alone once more, in the dreaming, with Emma. And Emma is always the herald of much strangeness. I can bear it no more; I want simplicity; I want the coherence of a single line in time, wherever that must be.

And I want Rebecca.

I must escape Emma. I *must*! Once awakened in the personal mind-scape, these energies can be very insistent, but I'm still minded to try. I cannot force myself awake, and dare not ask it of the dreaming to take me back in time again, for this would surely only complicate matters further. Instead, I do the next best thing, the *safer* thing; I close my eyes and ask it of the dreaming for a change of scene. But even as I feel the giddiness of the transition, I am aware also of Emma's hand upon my arm; it is therefore no surprise when I open them to find she's still there.

"You must be wide awake to loosen my hold," she says. "And you are not for waking yet. You're so tired - tired of the world and all that's in it; it'll be a while longer, before you wake up, Timothy, if indeed you ever do. But what is this, my love? Anyone would think you did not love me any more."

I make note of the suggestion I may never wake up, tell myself also that I must not interpret this literally, that by waking up Emma means something else, that the veils of illusion might never be lifted, that I might always be sleepwalking through life, and that even in death I might never realise the purpose of my being. I will be like those biblical blades of grass burned up and wasted. I wish she would go easy on me over such things, but of course that is not her purpose.

Oh,... trust not the sweetness of the siren muse, Lewis, lest she lead you only into the quagmire of the lustful swamp. But if she starts to challenge you, if she makes you afraid, you must ask yourself this: is it that she *really* threatens your well being, or does she seek to shake you out of your debilitating half-beliefs, to new and authentic levels of awareness?

Might such a muse then be trusted, Lewis?

Hell, I don't know.

We've been here before I think.

These creatures can be so alluring, yet also so ambiguous. They are as tangible as smoke. Ambivalence is always the best approach, neither trusting, nor fearing.

Okay, so where are we?

Ah,... I get it.

We are back in the mythic levels, as we were before, the pair of us seated in Sunday best, upon a cold flat rock by night, facing the lake. I did not ask for this, and why the dreaming thinks it is important I do not know, other than the fact it is but one step removed from Rebecca and her prayers for deliverance for the whole world.

Is that where Rebecca is now? Is she not waking to a fresh dawn somewhere, but still sleeping, like me? And is she still dreaming of delivering the world, through her ministry? I know, Lewis; in the dreaming, where anything can be true, there is the ever-present danger of incoherence. It doesn't lend itself to a good story. A story needs certainty, and the only certainty here is that I need the protection of my girls.

They are already disembarking from the skiff; bronze breastplates glinting beneath cloaks of Phoenecian purple. They fan out cautiously, prepared to do my bidding, but looking all the while hesitant, as if afraid I would command them injure a vital part of my self. Then Emma's own entourage emerges from the shadows, all leather Basques and straps, and fishnets and whips, like a comical teen fantasy.

My girls draw swords, Emma's unfurl their whips and gyrate their hips like devilish whores.

She laughs. "Gracious, Timothy! What a curious stand-off. How shall we resolve it, I wonder?"

But she's only teasing. She yields, lets go of my arm. Her girls withdraw into the shadows. My own sheathe their swords and step back to the shore. I see the glitter of relief in their eyes. Heaven forbid, they are thinking, I should ever go to war with myself.

"There," she says. "That's better. Now we can talk."

"Please,... no more talk, Emma. You tie me in knots!"

"Then let me show you something," she says. " And afterwards, you *shall* wake up. I promise."

"You promise? Really?"

She thinks for a moment. "Yes,... yes I think it's a definite possibility."

"I was hoping for something more concrete than that."

"I know you were."

Head in hands, I give a sigh which is also a cry for sanity. "I don't think I can take this any more."

She pats my arm reassuringly. "You'll be all right, Timothy. Do you think I would have brought you this far, otherwise?"

"Then show me."

Show me something!

What she has shown me so far is that a damaged life is not a ruined one, that it is upon the whetstone of adversity the human spirit is most keenly sharpened. Yet, naturally, given the opportunity to invent our own realities, we would edit out all forms of adversity, all forms of pain. We would invent for ourselves instead a paradise of pleasure. But pleasure is the thing we do when resting, Lewis. Adversity, *suffering*, is the thing we do for a living. We cannot help ourselves. Lives are broken on its anvil while others are made more meaningful and rise more beautifully from the ashes of the world. This is the way it is. Only through the gateway of life are we redeemed, enlightened,... only through the experience of a life informed by spirit shall we evolve beyond ten thousand years of war, sexual perversion, torture, corruption, terror-bogeymen and economic collapse.

Show me Emma.

The remarkable thing, Lewis, is that change in us, if it comes, comes in part through our adventures in the dreaming. It comes from the dialogues between a man and those voices inside of him. He might raise entire citadels in the waking world, but he shall always be a small man, a hollow man, unless he raises them also in his dreams.

Is any of this really true?

What's true, Lewis? I'll tell you:

The world is a place of immense suffering. You must know this more than most, having snooped at its underbelly for so long. You must surely feel that it's impossible to see the good in any of it. Our ignorance sows a bitter harvest, one spotlighted with brutal efficiency by our global news media, which shall surely one day put a camera on the very tip of a bullet as it tears flesh. A hundred years ago, we were less aware of the suffering in the greater world, even of an entire world at war, unlike now, when there is no end to the live commentary by which we might probe its ills from the

paradoxical comfort of our living rooms, between commercial breaks. We have no opportunity to rest, no breathing space between the breathless reportage of our undeveloped selves.

And your analysis reveals what? That the innocents run from the juggernaut's path, that it careens blindly, scorching vast swathes of the earth, returning them to an unspeakable barbarism. Our capacity for the creation of suffering is indeed immense, and seemingly the work of mere moments of madness. Conversely our ability to subvert suffering is pitifully weak, itself fraught with conflicting opinions, and is the work of generations. But if we could realise the dream, Lewis, what kind of earth would it be? Utopias vary from one soul to the next, but there would be no living in fear of our neighbour; there would be plenty to eat, and everyone would possess a secure roof under which to make love and nurture children. Returned to such an Eden, a man could then exercise his spirit with the million and one ways he might do good. But the human spirit as we experience it now would dissolve into lethargy without the limits imposed upon it by our mortality.

And in case you hadn't noticed, Lewis, Eden has fallen.

And the world is mad.

There is no solution to the cipher of the world.

One might have thought ten thousand years of civilisation would have yielded some defence, a key, a wise philosophy by which we might all live in harmony, and in doing so turn back the foetid tide. But if such a philosophy exists, we have rendered it in so many layers of myth by now we can do no more than argue over its interpretation. Meanwhile the earth burns; and the pace of this awful breaking through of banshees from the dark depths accelerates, and a rock from the skies will come and wipe us all out, and it won't make a jot of difference to anything. In the silence of the infinite, we will not even be missed.

Is it this, the thing Emma would show me? Would she take me on a tour of Bedlam only to point out the hopelessness of it, the absence of any cure to mankind's most pernicious malaise?

"It is as Lao Tzu taught us," she says, "that a man stands most securely when he has one foot in the outer, and one in the inner world."

And it is the inner world that flows through into the outer, not the other way round. It is not for a man to seek his return to the womb, though in truth, Lewis, I have been seeking it all my life. But

we cannot transcend what ails us by escaping it. We transcend a thing by acquiring the vision to see it for what it truly is, and then we simply do not mind it any more.

What I'm trying to say Lewis, what I think Emma is trying to show me in all of this is that my place is still very much in the world. And that makes me wonder, because even though it was she who first hinted at the ending of the world, if the world really has so little time to go, why then would she be bothering to send me back?

Emma?

"Time to wake up," she says. "You'll be late for work."

"Hmm, what?"

Chapter 58

All right,...

Six thirty: Rise; pee out my aching bladder, then shuffle into the back garden for Qigong, warming gradually to Tai Chi, then a little Kung Fu. These are Chinese exercises for mind and body, Lewis. There is no equivalent system in the West, where the imaginative faculties have been regarded with increasing suspicion since the day we laid Wordsworth to rest in Saint Oswald's churchyard.

That was in 1850.

Seven fifteen now: Shower then breakfast, while I scroll through the news on the 'Droid: War, sexual perversion, torture, corruption, terror-bogeymen and economic collapse.

Same as it's always been.

Eight o'clock: I leave the house and drive from the southern suburbs of Middleton, to the north, to the school. My radio is tuned to the BBC. There's a politician of the party of the rich bluntly evading questions, while landing spurious rabbit punches on the policies of the party of the less rich. I note there is no party of the poor these days. The vacuum is suffocating. No one of intelligence talks about change any more, only of adaptation to circumstances that cannot be altered. The interview ends in a stalemated nothingness, fades back into the breathless reportage of war, sexual perversion, torture, corruption, terror-bogeymen and economic collapse.

I shiver: someone walking over my grave.

My, the world feels hollow this morning.

Emma? Is that you?

Eight fifteen, and I'm cruising past Dave's Dodgy motors on Elm Street, and see an old MX5 roadster for sale, all glittery in the early morning sunlight. Am I not overdue a change of vehicle, Lewis? Is a little sport's car too menopausal do you think for a man of my age? But what's wrong with having a bit of fun?

Eight thirty: The day begins. Meeting with other male colleagues in the boss's office, all of us seated like ministers of state around a pretentious oval table. I don't know what the meeting's about yet, and I'm too old to care.

Wait,... have we not been here before, Lewis?

I think we have.

Check your transcripts for me, would you - there's a good chap.

Indeed, I know we have.

Okay,.. that was subtly done, and I was slow to wake up to it!

Nearly missed it.

Fuck!

Note to self - must do better!

There are two conclusions I can draw here: I am either still in the dreaming and this is a false awakening, or this is the waking reality the dreaming has seen fit to wake me back to. The waking reality that is *right* for me.

And if it's the latter, *when* is this, exactly? Have we gone back a week again, to that morning meeting over the suits and the five E's? Is this one of those peculiar Groundhog day things, where I must divine the gap in my attitude and plug it in order to move on, or the day simply repeats itself ad nauseum?

I hope not, because I'm really lost now.

Date Timothy?

My father's Bernex says it's the 7th. Of what? The 'Droid says the 7th of September, but the year cannot be right. And the asteroid was due to hit on the 17th of August, but which August? The August just gone, or the one yet to come? The 'Droid definitely suggests the latter and I've had no reason to doubt its reliability in the past. Okay, let's work with that hypothesis:

What's happened here is this: I have woken *back* a year, to the start of term.

Is that possible? No, bear with me, I mean the first time I saw that old MX5 Roadster, was August, a year from now. Surely Dodgy Dave would have sold it by then, yet it was already there this morning - a year ago! Do you follow me?

Inconsistencies, Lewis.

Glitches.

Never mind.

Okay, advantages of the current scenario, please?

Well, I'm still alive, also year younger, 48 in fact and I have yet to be ripped off for a new gearbox for the Volvo, around Novemberish. I shall take it elsewhere for repair when the time comes, if it comes this time, and always supposing I'm still around in the morning.

Or I could trade it to Dodgy Dave for that cute little roadster.

Hmm,... tempting!

Focus, Timothy; disadvantages now: several; the main one being I'm feeling faint and breaking out into a giddy sweat.

Keep it together, this is really, really interesting.

Did we know Rebecca in September of last year?

No we didn't, Lewis. Does she even work here? When did she start? Was it the beginning of term? Think man!

The meeting gets under way:

Ah,... we're at the opening stages of the war of the suits. Strickland makes his preliminary skirmish, announcing that the varied threads we're all wearing this morning are incompatible with his vision for the future for the school, that he wants to see us all dressed like professionals by this time next week. Raul and I exchange glances.

The memory of this morning returns to me more fully now. There are clues in the things happening around me - the look in Raul's eye, in the nervous flutter of papers on the table to my left, in the impatient and oft repeated clicking of a pen somewhere to my right. It settles me in. Something meshes in my brain, and I pick up the threads. This time travel is becoming easier - it's all a matter of picking up the flow, of not resisting it.

"Professional what?" I ask.

I look at Raul, but he is looking at me, his eyes slightly wider than usual. It's me who has spoken, and I am slow to realise it. I look at Strickland who was flicking through his Powerpoint, looking for the one about the five E's, no doubt, but is now arrested as everyone's time-line branches off into new territory.

Including his.

See how it is the small things that changes lives, Lewis?

"I'm sorry, Mr. Magowan?" Note the barbed hook in that question-mark. Strickland does not need me to repeat the question, rather he dares me to do it.

"Professional *what*, Mr Strickland?"

He looks about him, reads the mood of the room, detects a mixture of embarrassment, unease and impatience. He smiles a little, seeks to gauge the number who are willing to smile with him. There are two: the brutish, ambitious and spittle-ejecting Lister, also Ratface - the latter only out of duty though, being Strickland's deputy and ever hopeful replacement.

"*Teachers*, Mr. Magowan." This much, he implies should be obvious.

"Are you saying I am unprofessional in my conduct, Mr. Strickland, because I do not wear a suit?"

He sighs. Am I so stupid I cannot get his message? I think I get it, but am tired of being made to guess. I want him to spell it out. I want him to be clear.

"It is the appearance of things," he says. "I do not like sports coats."

Raul chips in: "How about my shirt?"

This raises a nervous titter from those drawn instinctively towards our camp. Raul did not need to say anything, hardly thinks the issue of the suits worth making a voluble stand over - he would rather simply ignore it. Therefore I realise he spoke in support of me, and my love for the man expands to a boundless state on account of it. I decide I would not betray him, though they were beating me senseless with sticks.

Who?

The tattooed bruisers, Lewis!

Never mind.

Strickland clears his throat, directs attention back to himself. "I'm merely saying it would be more appropriate,..."

My turn to chip in again. I do not want to challenge his authority. He's the boss after all and his authority is a given. What I want is *clarity of leadership*. "Are you saying you would *prefer* it, Mr. Strickland, or that you *demand* it?"

But remember Lewis, Strickland is not the sort of man to *demand* anything because it renders something immovably concrete, when of course he is no more sure of his direction in life than any of us, and would prefer to keep the boundaries vague. The dictatorial boss has now largely gone to earth and hides behind a shield of psychological warfare, which he subcontracts to the HR department, also known as the school's business management team, also formerly known as the school secretaries. And rather you cross them than me, Lewis! But no, he will not say he *demands* it, and retreats once more into mealy-mouthedness:

"I'm saying it would be preferable, Mr. Magowan, and I know you would not want to let the school down in this respect."

I make a note of the word on my pad and underline it. "You would *prefer* it. Thank you. But I would *prefer* to dress as I am, and as I always have. Therefore we're at an impasse, Mr. Strickland. What are we to do about it?"

"Em,... we could perhaps discuss this outside of the meeting, Mr. Magowan. I've stated my position on it. Please contact the office if you wish to make an appointment. Now we're a little pressed for time and I'd like to move on."

Note how he evades conflict, fears to lose face. My word, aren't I the bad ass this morning? But I do not wish to be rude, I merely seek to clarify his thinking, then I might also be clear in my own - no sense in minion and master meeting on terms that are mutually delusional. I consider asking him if I will be sacked for not wearing a suit, but decide against this, wonder if the Whittakers will be selling their bookshop in this timeline also; the thought is curiously uplifting. I wonder if Rebecca will go for it.

Wait, we're jumping the gun a little here. Remember, we have yet to *meet* Rebecca.

"Wrong side of the bed this morning, Timothy?" Raul quizzes me as we make our way to our tutor groups.

"Hmm?"

"I know you're attached to your tweed jacket, but there was no need to shove it up his arse. What we wear isn't worth going to war over. There are other things, like the dire state of our educational resources, while rumour has it Ratface is ordering us all a shed-load of tablet computers. I mean, what the *fuck* are we supposed to do with those when its pens and paper and paints and books we're in need of?"

"I'm not wearing a suit to work, Raul, and that's final."

"Well, neither am I. I mean can you even *imagine* me in a suit? But I think this situation is better handled by merely avoiding eye contact and ignoring the dictat, than by standing up and *saying* one is ignoring it."

Sigh. "You're right of course. I'm just tired of all that mealy mouthed bullshit."

"Who isn't? But we must pick our battles. This isn't like you, Timothy. You have a strange vibe about you this morning. Are you taking anything? Steroids perhaps? They affect the mind you know, make us more confident and assertive than we really are,... even aggressively so. Don't get me wrong, I like the feel of this new you, but we must be careful; the dose is clearly too strong. We should moderate it a little."

"I'm *not* taking steroids. Or anything else for that matter." I try a change of subject. "How's Dora?"

"Oh she's well, thank you. She asks about you constantly - *has Timothy found himself a nice girl yet*? I tell her no, but I'm working on it. Speaking of which, there's a new girl starts this morning - we should introduce ourselves."

"That'll be Rebecca. Religious and Moral studies, right?"

"You're remarkably well informed for once! Have you already been introduced?"

"To tell the truth I don't know, but I hope so."

"You either have or you haven't."

"Actually from my perspective, it's not quite so simple. If I'd met her in another life, say, and we'd become lovers, would that mean we'd already met in this life or were yet to be introduced? It's an interesting question, Raul. And if we've yet to be introduced, does it mean we're more likely to become lovers in this life because of our intimacy in another? Really I don't know, but I sincerely hope we have already been introduced. I'd hate to have to flirt with her in case she were to prove unwilling this time around. And that would be a pity, knowing her as I already do. I mean did. Or at least will do,... I think."

Worse than that Lewis, it would be a cruel God who made it so, yet the possibility exists somewhere – that Rebecca does not like me.

Raul tries to read me, and is roundly defeated. "I see we're in a playful mood this morning! An hour with your charges will soon knock that out of you. I'll see you at lunch time, okay?"

"Sure, Raul." He's about to break away but I find my hand upon his shoulder, my heart filled with a strange yearning. "Thanks for sticking up for me in there."

"It was my pleasure, and worth it for the laugh. We are not alone you know. Others feel as we do, only they lack the convictions to say so. We must help them gird their loins. Lead by example. Wear your tweeds with pride my friend, and I'll be sure to turn the volume up on my shirts from now on. Deal?"

"Deal."

We shake hands - last of the rebels.

"Hey Raul, did I ever tell you how much I loved you,.. em,... man? "

He smiles guardedly as a gaggle of girls pass by, hands suddenly clasped to their mouths. "Careful Timothy. Children have a remarkably immature attitude to that sort of comment, even between consenting males. But to answer your question, you did

not tell me, and in reply to what you did not tell me, I tell you in all sincerity that never have I loved a man as much as I love you."

So,...

Morning break, now. We get twenty minutes to brew tea, those of us not on guard duty at least. I sit alone amid the cacophony. Staff on break here are apt to be noisier than children in a ball pit. I usually hide in my room rather than seek out the social life of the school, and I'm not sure exactly what has brought me here, other than pig-headedness and a vague memory of something Rebecca once said to me.

And speaking of balls, mine feel a bit bigger this morning, I mean after my childish run-in with Strickland, so perhaps that's it - you know, a primate thing? I have come to strut my status as a cock, or perhaps it's just that the simple act of speaking my mind for once that has restored decades of atrophied self-confidence. But if that's so, why do I feel like the same old dick-head sitting here on my own? Raul was right. There was no need to pick a fight with Strickland over this. But I didn't do it last time, didn't pick the fight, and look what happened; things can hardly work out any worse, can they?

Note, Lewis, how no one speaks to me, nor even glances in my direction. Note also how much more at ease I am with things today. Of course I am reticent by nature - nothing new there - also selective in my friendships. I know others read it as surliness, and I am of course still *persona non grata* with the longer serving women here, who remain friendly with Miranda.

Oh dear, what are you doing, Timothy?

Go, retreat to your forlorn little outpost in the English department.

No, wait,... I have an inkling of entering a familiar stream. I notice the chair next to mine is empty and sense something portentous in it. Ah,... yes: I look up to see Rebecca, also see the way others are looking at her behind her back. And how do they look at her Lewis? Well, it's with what I can only describe as a kind of cold curiosity, just a little short of contempt. This seems unduly harsh, but she is wearing the suit and the collar of her office. She materialises into this reality as a priestess already born, and that confuses all of us, because of course, this is not a church school and her kind is not welcome here. Except by me.

But does she remember me? Does she remember us, as we were? Is she the version of Rebecca I once knew, or must we start all over again?

She winks at me. "Scowly stern, Magowan, as usual, I see?"

She knows me! Once more! And thank God, our paths are not for parting yet. Something binds us, binds us with a purpose that is still mysterious. She observes with sympathy as the tears well up, looks at me now with a kind of loving indulgence that is surely inappropriate given that, technically speaking, this is our first meeting.

She mouths the words "Bless you, Tim."

And I do feel blessed - eternally blessed to be able to explore time this way, with her. But how long can we maintain this?

Don't think about it Timothy. Say something witty instead:

"Are you wearing that collar to provoke a reaction, Ms. Raworth?"

"No, I'm wearing it so I can be sure you'll recognise me. And I see you do, which is a tremendous relief. May I sit?"

"Please do."

"Okay, but are you sure you want to be seen talking to a vicar? I've not felt this uncomfortable in a long time - not since I danced the entire first act of Joseph's Technicolour Dreamcoat with a gaping hole in my tights. Talk about being stared at!"

"Then I suppose someone must cast you the line of friendship."

"Thanks." She sits, sips her tea. "Are we awake, do you think?"

"Well, I've never had a false awakening that's lasted this long, so I'm assuming we're awake, yes."

I want to touch her, press her hand, her arm, anything but of course that would look out of place, our having only just met, and casually at that. "I can't tell you how glad I am to see you. I may hug you in a minute. All this restraint is killing me."

"Don't you dare," she says. "Wait until we get home."

"Your place or mine?"

"Stop it!"

"What?"

"Sober faces please. We look like we're flirting, and it's far too soon for that. Another few weeks and it might be safe to allow it."

"Okay, fair point. If we're still here, that is."

"Well I hope we're still here, Tim because we've seen the future and I don't like it much."

Ah, the asteroid. I was forgetting that.

"You think we should stick around for a bit then? See what happens?"

"We didn't ask for this, remember? We're following the path the dreaming has opened for us, rather than the one we thought was expected."

"Even though it's the one we would have wished for?"

She blushes. "Yes,..."

"But you think it's enough? A year? It's only a year,... it could still hit us in a year."

"Who knows? And anyway it looks like we've no choice. I've a feeling this is it, Timothy."

There are more eyes upon us now. I feel their scorn, sense the judgement in their whispered asides: queer, grumpy old Magowan and the new girl, Rebecca! And what gives her the right to wear the uniform of the priesthood, here? And did you hear about his career-limiting outburst in the meeting this morning?

Hmm.

Why is it people who don't believe in God, still fear God, Lewis?

"Good point," says Rebecca, still capable it seems of reading my thoughts. "But I find the Godless fear death more than they fear God. Unless they're young, in which case they fear neither."

"Well, they'll have it to face sooner or later. End of term, possibly."

"Maybe. Or like Wordsworth was saying, maybe it depends how much we want it, Tim. Life I mean. Do we want it? After all, looking round this morning, nothing's really changed has it?"

"I don't know. I shoved my tweed jacket up Strickland's arse, and I told Raul I loved him. Who knows what I'll say or do the rest of the day. I seem to be capable of anything."

She tries hard to suppress a grin, fails. "How did Strickland take that?"

"Not as well as Raul. He's in his office now marking my cards. But I think I *do* want it, Rebecca."

"Really?"

"I see things differently this morning, feel them differently. Like your mate Wordsworth said, things just are. It's the faculty of the imagination that has them mean anything at all. And like in your Bible, the truth, the form, is nothing unless you can feel the goodness in it too, and the fact is I no longer see the world as it was, not as I think Lewis still sees it. I see it more as I am, now, and what I am now *wants* to see the goodness in it. I prefer my world to be *enchanted*. What about you?"

She smiles. "Still got a leg like butchered cow. But do you see me limping?"

The bell sounds the end of break and the tide of chaos changes from flow to ebb. Rebecca and I do not move. Is this it? I wonder. And I ask it again of myself: has this thread of thought escaped the asteroid, escaped its perpetual nemesis? In short, Lewis, come news of war, sexual perversion, torture, corruption, terror-bogeymen and economic collapse, will we still be here tomorrow?

She pats my leg and rises.

"See you later, Timbo."

Oh, I hope so, Lewis. I hope so.

I rise to take my place in your still crumbling machinery, note momentarily the still rich texture of my tweed, then enter the fray of the dusty corridors. I am in a benign and contemplative mood, seriously contemplating swapping the old Volvo for that flighty little MX5, contemplating spending my inheritance on a failing second hand bookshop in Penrtih.

I'm also just in time to catch Christopher (Plank) Stott, mouth agape as he drools over the page three tits of a big- tit red-top. Crimson faced, he makes a hurried and rather comical attempt to hide the rag.

"Sorry, sir."

I pretend sternness and disapproval: "Put it in your bag, son, before you go blind."

I catch the headlines as he does so. War and sexual perversion share the front page. Torture, corruption, terror-bogeymen and economic collapse will all feature inside, under the guise of hysterical rants.

Same as it's always been, then.

Well, not quite.

I pretend a begrudging smile, trying hard not to overdo it. "Come along, Mr Stott, we'll walk together."

He warms to the invitation. He's not a bad lad – a little troublesome at times but no different to the rest of us. He just wants to feel he's respected for being who he is, and that he has a purpose in the world.

And the world does not feel so hollow any more.

I enter the classroom,... smiling, and thinking what?

Monday, is it? My spirits are not usually so buoyant at this stage of the working week. I wonder if Rebecca fancies a trip up to the

cabin on Friday night?

Oh, I know what you're thinking, Lewis, and me too: will the next fall of night pull the rug from under our feet once more? Maybe it will, but I'm confident this is where I'm meant to be. How do I know? Well, I don't for sure, and can only suggest to you it is Emma whispering her reassurances in my ear. She tells me I'm right to be secure in myself, and in my faith for the future as it plays out from this moment, that the rest will simply take care of itself.

That's the miracle of life, you see? The setting of the sun might have a powerful effect upon the senses, but we must learn to recognise it as an illusion, that even as it sets, it is already rising somewhere else.

Goodbye Lewis.

Keep well, my friend.